THE DESERT PATROL

Roy J. Snell

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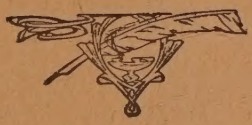
By

ROY J. SNELL



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CHAPTER I

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

Curlie Carson's knees trembled. Half suffocated, he held his breath as if fearing someone might hear, and he did fear that very thing. His mind was in a whirl. Had he seen a head rise above the fallen spruce tree that lay a hundred paces above him? He thought he had, yet could not be quite sure. And if he had, if it appeared again, what then? With a thumb that trembled he noiselessly lifted the hammer of the powerful rifle which his left hand gripped.

It was night. All about him trees loomed. Giants of a mountain-side forest they were, for the sound of the woodsman's axe had never been heard here. It was cold; a chill ran up his spine. His feet were benumbed. At two o'clock in the morning the air on the side of the mountain,

eight thousand feet above the sea, is like the winter air of the prairie or the desert.

The situation which confronted Curlie was fascinating and strange. To the right of him, not a hundred yards away, Ambrosio Chaves, a half Mexican whom Curlie suspected of being one of the most dreaded horse thieves in all the borderland between the United States and Mexico, lay hiding. It was part of Curlie's present task, and purpose too, to defend this supposed bandit. If the head again appeared above that log; if the head were followed by hands and a rifle; if the rifle were lifted for a shot, he very much regretted to tell himself that it would be his duty to lift his own rifle and with an aim swift and sure, drop that mysterious stranger behind the log, drop him as he might a prowling wolf.

He would shoot the stranger, whom he knew not at all, to protect Ambrosio, whom he knew very well and whom he cordially hated. A strange situation indeed. As his mind dwelt upon it, he threw back his head as if to laugh.

He did not laugh. Instead, he dropped quite flat upon a bed of pine needles. His heart skipped a beat. Had he heard a movement to his left, or was it merely one of the horses moving in the valley below? In such a situation, one takes few chances. He lay quite still. His eyes were still fixed upon the spot where the head had seemed to appear. It was fairly dark and hard to distinguish figures. One of the attacking party, if indeed they were to be attacked, might slip quite upon him before he was aware.

"Rotten business!" he thought to himself. "But when you've put your hand to a thing, you've just naturally got to see it through — that is, if you've got any red blood in you."

Hidden in this same forest, that made a horseshoe-like curve about the upper edge of a narrow pocket of a valley, were seven boys and men. Five of these were practically outlaws. If not outlaws at that moment, they had, Curlie believed, already put themselves in a position to be made outlaws. These men, for the moment, Curlie was determined to defend. The one

other of the party was Clyde Hopkins, an honest young cowboy, Curlie's companion. He too was ready to defend their position. Below them in a pole corral that was cleverly concealed with green branches, were some forty horses, colts and ponies. More than half these had been stolen, or at least Curlie supposed they had, by Ambrosio and his companions. Yet it was Curlie's purpose to help defend the outlaws in their possession of the horses. Put on top of all this the fact that Curlie, while not an officer of the law, was as near to it as one might well be. He was a member of the Secret Service of the Air, whose station was far below and to the right across ten miles of wind-blown, sand-strewn desert. And at this moment, in the midst of great peril, under the strangest of situations, he was, as far as he could see, acting in the strict line of duty.

"Mighty queer!" he told himself. "Mighty queer! Could hardly believe—"

His thoughts were cut short. With a swift, noiseless motion his rifle slid into position. A

head had surely appeared above a fallen tree. The expected rifle had followed it. It had been pointed in a direction to the right of Curlie and was beginning to steady for a shot, when a puff of smoke suddenly leaped out of the dark. It came from Curlie's rifle. There followed a slight clatter, as if a rifle had been dropped upon a log. Then, as before, all was silent.

As if he himself had been shot, Curlie suddenly rolled down the steep hillside. He did this to protect himself. The enemy might shoot at the spot from which he had fired. Fifteen feet lower down, he came to rest against a giant of the forest. For a full minute he did not move. Then, gliding stealthily forward, he found a position at about the same level as the one he had first occupied, but some ten yards to the right of it. From this point he could still see the fallen tree. For five minutes his eyes never left the spot. Then with a whispered, "Hope I didn't do him in," he sank back to a position of repose.

Lest my reader should begin at this point to

lose faith in his one-time hero, Curlie Carson, who carried himself so nobly and with such an upright character through the adventures told in "Curlie Carson Listens In" and "The Yukon Trail," let me assure you that he has not lost any of his sterling character, nor any of his bravery either. In fact, the undertaking in which he was engaged at this moment had involved him in more danger than any of his previous adventures and promised in the near future to lead him into dangers the like of which he had never before in all his eventful career come near to experiencing.

As for Curlie, at this particular moment he was engaged in a series of reflections regarding the days that had just passed. As had been the case in some of his other adventures, it had been a whisper, a whisper floating in over the air, that had led him to his present position. At first this whisper had been vague and undefined, yet telling of something big going on down in the Great American Desert, close to the Mexican border. The radiophone was being used as an

aid by those who wished to thwart justice and rob others of their honest earnings. If this were the case, then here was a task for the members of the Secret Service of the Air, of whom Curlie was one. He had been sent to the desert to establish a listening-in post there and to discover if possible whether or not such a post could be of real service to the American citizens who lived here and there, scattered over the desert and through the forests of mountain ranges.

He had come. He had set his steel posts, like flagposts, high in air out in the desert. On these posts he had strung his aerials. Beneath the posts he had built a cabin of lumber and tar paper. There, with his powerful receiving and sending set at his elbow and with his head-piece drawn down over his ears, he had sat down to wait and to listen.

The message of importance, which he had felt sure would at last come to him from the lips of the "Whisperer," that weird phantom-girl of the air, might, he knew quite well, have to do with any of a half dozen important affairs. It

might concern whiskey runners, bringing the rawest and rankest kind of poison across the line from Mexico, peddling it alike to white men and Indians. Natives, driven mad by this poison liquor, had committed frightful crimes. It might be his task to assist in searching out these law-breakers. Across that same international boundary line, from time to time Japanese and Chinese were smuggled. Perhaps the message would deal with this. Wild Mexican raiders, when least expected, crept across the border to steal cattle and horses from the scattered ranchers. Assisted by treacherous Indians who alone knew the trails of the desert mountain fastnesses, these bands were able to escape to Mexico with their booty. The radiophone could not but help them in arranging these raids. It might, however, also lead to their undoing.

What was the big thing that was to be his task? Curlie had asked himself this question over and over as the days passed. One thing surprised him: That was the way in which the radiophone was being adapted to the needs of

the desert. In cities and thickly settled country places the radiophone was a luxury.

In these wild, little-frequented spots, where the telephone and telegraph had not found their way and where the automobile was all but useless, the radiophone was fast becoming a necessity. The lone ranger on the desert, the sheep-herder on the top of a mountain, the irrigation farmer on his little oasis, were one and all connected by the radiophone to the nearest settlement and to the whole world outside.

Often and often, as the glorious music of some great symphony or grand opera came floating to him faintly from afar, Curlie caught it in his receiver and, having passed it through his many-stage amplifier, had sent it booming forth to gladden the hearts of those who sat in waste and silent places far from others of the human kind. At other times he had assisted in the search for men lost on the desert, or in bringing doctors to bedsides where they were greatly needed.

All these services Curlie performed with the

best skill that was in him, but always he listened for that important message from the Whisperer.

His motives for catching the message were two: He wished to do something in a big way. Nothing could so quickly establish the value and necessity of his station as this. He wished also to hear again the voice of the Whisperer. For months and months she had haunted his trail through the air. She had told him that her home was at the edge of this Great American Desert. He felt a great confidence that he would, sooner or later, on this desert come face to face with her. It will not seem strange, then, that after all these months of mystery he would be waiting eagerly for the word that might hasten the day when he might look at the mystery girl and say to himself with conviction, "She is the one. She is the Whisperer."

Then came the day when the message thrilled out upon the air, the message that was to draw Curlie into such adventures as he had never before experienced.

CHAPTER II

A WHISPERED MESSAGE

Curlie, lying here in hiding on the mountain side, had gone this far in recalling past events which had led up to his present rather strange position, when his keen ears detected some sound. Coming as it seemed from lower down and to the right, it at once set his nerves tingling.

"From the direction of the corral," he told himself in a tense whisper.

For a moment he lay there silent, motionless, scarcely breathing. It had been but a faint sound, the rustling of a pine branch, perhaps. Not one of his confederates had noticed it, he felt sure of that. Only the keen, radio ears of a born radio detective could have done that. Yet there had been a sound, a movement. There was someone down there, he was quite sure of that.

"Can't be Ambrosio," he told himself. "He's

too sharp to give the location of the horses away like that."

The next instant the boy sat bolt upright and stared. There had come to his waiting ears a familiar sound: the sharp, high-pitched whinny of a pony.

"Canary!" he whispered. "Couldn't mistake him from a thousand. He's in danger, too, I'll be bound. Never heard him say it just that way but once. That time two timber wolves were stalking him.

"No timber wolves this time," he said grimly as he dropped upon hands and knees and, thrusting his rifle before him, began making his way silently down the hill in the direction from which had come the pony's call for aid. "No timber wolves," he repeated; "human wolves, that's what, and the worst kind at that. Raiders that raid those of their own kind. Well, they sha'n't have Canary."

Canary was a small blue mustang. Curlie had picked him up cheap out on the range. He had received many a throw and many a bruise before

he had convinced the wiry little beast that he meant well by him and that it was a great deal more fun to have a master riding on his back for company than to be wandering alone and unprotected across the desert. When at last the pony had learned this lesson, he had become an inseparable companion to the boy at his lonely post on the desert. He had proved himself the speediest, pluckiest, toughest little pony in all that broad stretch of mountain and desert. He would follow his master about and only a corral, such as now surrounded him, could keep him from the boy's side.

He was Curlie's first horse. Automobiles he had had and had managed well. He knew a little of airplanes, too. But these, he now knew, were mere machines, not in any way to be compared to a companion such as a horse, a creature of flesh and blood that could listen to you and understand as well as any human — sometimes better.

"Yes, yes, old pal," he whispered, as the pony whinnied again, this time as if he was confident

that his call had been heard. "Yes, yes, I'm coming. They won't get you. They might have the others, though I don't want that either, but you they shall never have."

All this time he was gliding silently downward over the pine-needle blanket that was soft and silent as a cover of eiderdown.

After covering ten yards or more he paused to listen. A sound came to him. Closer than had been the other, it startled him. He might have come too close. There might be several of the raiders. He might be in danger of being ambushed.

His eyes circled from right to left and from left to right, like a searchlight. Now he shifted his position ever so slightly. Directly below him were two giant fir trees. Behind these was a mass of green that by the darkness was turned to pitchy black. This black mass was a camouflage to hide the strong poles that made up the horse corral. Behind this were the forty ponies and horses.

"Bars should be just at the right of those twin

firs," he told himself. "No use going closer. Too risky. Stay here. I can see anyone who comes up to those bars. Can't let the horses out any other way. Let 'em try it; I'll get 'em first crack."

Dropping flat upon the soft bed of needles, he cautiously moved his rifle forward to a resting place across the protruding root of a fir tree, then, with eyes and ears alert, waited for something to happen. For full five minutes he remained thus. Not a sound came to him from near or far. The night air grew colder each moment. A breeze creeping up from the lower levels chilled him to the bone.

"Boo!" he breathed. "Wish this night's watch was over."

Since it was not over and would not be for some time to come, he settled himself as comfortably as might be and gave himself again to thought. He was conscious of missing something. Somehow he seemed incomplete. It was as if he had come out upon the streets of a city without collar or necktie. As his mind searched

for the cause of his sense of incompleteness, he found it at last.

"My head-set," he said with a smile. "I've grown so used to having those old radio things over my ears that I don't feel dressed without them. Wish I had them now. Wish they were connected up with the air. 'Twouldn't seem so lonesome and so cold. And I might catch some whisper from her, from the good little Whisperer."

A wave of lonesomeness swept over him. Suddenly for the first time he realized that the messages of this mysterious Whisperer of the air had come to mean a great deal to him.

Curlie was a boy without a family. If he had any living relatives, he did not know of them. Finding himself lonely at times, he had at last taken the whole world for his family. By the broad sweep of his radio he had brought them together and all very close to him. He meant to be, in so far as was possible, of service to them all. But this Whisperer, in spite of him, had come nearer than any or all the rest of them.

Without his head-set by which he might receive any little whispered message that she might send out to him, he became intensely lonely.

It was only natural that, finding himself in this frame of mind, he should turn his thoughts to the last message he had received from her. No, not quite the last, for there had been one later, but at least the most important and longest message he had ever received from her.

"And to think," he told himself, as his mind took up the thread of it, "when she whispered to me, only thirty miles of desert lay between us, yet I might not see her whom I have never seen; could only listen to her voice."

He recalled it all now as if it had been but an hour before. He had been waiting for a message, any message, for he had had a feeling that one would come. He had been standing beside his pony with his head-set pressed down over his ears. In another moment he would have gone spinning out across the desert. Then her message had come floating over the air.

His hand had dropped from the pommel of

the saddle and he had leaped for the shack door.

"Hello, Curlie! Hello! Are you there?"

His nerves had tingled at the sound; his pulse had quickened at the thought. He had caught in that whisper the old note of suppressed mystery.

"Things doing!" he had murmured as he waited breathlessly for the next sentence.

He had not long to wait. Out of the air it came, a low whisper, but distinct as the loudest shout might have been: "Hello, Curlie! How would you like to take a little vacation? How would you like to go chasing wild horses on the Timber Reservation?"

"Chasing wild horses! What nonsense!" Curlie had exclaimed.

"You make a fine figure of a cowboy on your little blue pony, Curlie. It matches your complexion beautifully!" There had been almost a laugh in the whisper. Curlie did not exactly like it.

"Yes, you do, Curlie; you look fine, you do, and I'm sure they'd take you. Tell you what,

Curlie; there's a regular cowboy down at Bill McKee's ranch. He just came from Denver. He's a great rider. I saw him win his saddle and spurs in a contest where there were ten riders of the very best competing against him. Clyde Hopkins is his name. He's tired of city life and is out for excitement. And believe me, Curlie, he'll get it up there in the timber running wild horses." Again for a moment the whisper had ceased.

"Thinking up some more nonsense," Curlie had grinned.

Curlie had been puzzled at the turn affairs had taken. He had thought the Whisperer had wanted to tell him something of importance, something related to his work. And here she was "joshing" him — or so it seemed to him. Surely she could not be in earnest, suggesting that he go hunting wild horses on the Timber Reservation.

"First time I ever heard of wild horses in the timber," he had whispered to himself. "Don't believe there is a one. Plenty of moose

and elk, but wild horses — what nonsense!"

Hearing the nicker of his blue pony outside, he had been tempted to hang his head-piece on the wall, lock the door, leap upon his pony and go racing away over the sand.

"Be late, as it is," he had told himself. He had planned a trip to Mogordo for provisions. It was a long ride, fifteen miles and back.

"And now I think —"

He had meant to say that he thought the Whisperer might go to thunder, for he had more important business than listening to her nonsense, when the whisper had begun again:

"You think I'm joking."

Curlie had started. It was as if the Whisperer had read his thoughts from afar.

"I knew you would, Curlie." The tone of the whisper was entirely serious now. "I wasn't, though. I said that just to get you curious. Thought you might ride away on your blue pony before I was through, if I didn't get you guessing.

"But, Curlie, the matter's really serious. There

are wild ponies up in the canyons of the Timber Reservation, real little horses, wild as deer. For the most part they don't belong to anyone. The one who catches them owns them. Sometimes the boys of the prairies go up there and build a trap in a ravine. Then they drive the ponies down through and catch them. They do it more for fun than anything else, as the ponies are small and not worth much.

"But now, Curlie, a man has arrived on the scene who says he proposes to make a serious business of catching these ponies and shipping them east. I don't think he really intends to do it; he's using that for a blind. He's after bigger game than those little yellow ponies. What that game is, Curlie, is your job to find out. You are the Desert Patrol. Your business is to run down men who use the air for illegal purposes. This man has a fellow with him who is an expert radiophone operator. And that man is both crooked and ambitious, Curlie; there's the danger. His name is Ambrosio Chaves. And the name of the other man is Pete Modder. Mod-

der has four big, lazy boys who are just like himself. They used to live in Texas. They stayed until they were wanted for stealing and fraud. Then they went to Canada. When the Mounties began to look for them, they came back over the border into Washington. When they were wanted in Washington they moved to Idaho. And now they are here. Their game is to get a few horses one way or another, then to move to town and go into business. When they have robbed everyone who trusts them, they move on.

"But, Curlie," the whisper became more serious still; "Ambrosio Chaves is ambitious. He wants to become a cattle king. He would stop at nothing. He has been suspected of much, but nothing thus far has been proved against him. If you can get him, get him hard and dead to rights, Curlie, you'll win your western spurs. They'll be golden spurs with points of platinum; I promise it, Curlie.

"So now, Curlie, you just skip over to the ranch I told you about and ask Clyde Hopkins

if he doesn't want to ride over to the gap in the Big Black Canyon and join in with those men who are going after wild horses. He'll go, Curlie, for he likes excitement. They'll let you help them, too, Curlie, for they don't like work, and it's real work to build a trap that will catch horses."

The whisper had ceased. Curlie had sat down unsteadily.

"Huh!" he had breathed softly. "Sounds like something, after all, something really big. And those golden spurs with the platinum points, they sound good to me too. Fine keepsake to take back to old Chicago. I'll have them, sure. Skin me alive, if I don't have 'em from the fair lady's own hand, too."

Had Curlie known how true these words were to prove to be, and how many strange adventures he would go through before they came true, he might have remained seated thinking longer than he did. As it was, he had hung up his receiver, locked the door and, leaping upon his pony, had ridden away over the moonlit desert.

"And that," he told himself as he came to that part of his recollections, "is why I am here tonight. That is —"

His reflections cut short, he suddenly gripped his rifle. He had caught a flash of light against the dark green of the fir boughs.

"Flashlight!" he breathed softly. "The raiders are at the bars. Now, Canary, it's quick action and danger, or you are lost!"

CHAPTER III

A WATCH IN THE DARK

Rising upon one knee, with the butt of his heavy rifle pressed solidly against his shoulder, he waited. So silent was the forest, so ghostly the night, he heard the regular tick-tick of his watch and counted the beats of his own heart. Little drops of perspiration stood out upon the tip of his nose. His knees quivered, but still he sat there motionless.

"The light will flash again and then—" he whispered to himself.

A full moment passed, a moment in which he fancied many things. Now he imagined he caught a movement at his right. Someone was creeping upon him. And now there did come a faint thud from below. Whether this was the stamp of a horse's hoof or the drop of a raider's rifle to the ground, he could not tell.

Then, suddenly lighting up the dark, there came a prolonged flash from the electric torch. At the edge of that circle of light appeared a dark face, a face entirely strange to Curlie; the face of some swarthy Mexican. The next instant, with muscles tense, Curlie thrust out a finger for his trigger. At that same instant, as if by prearrangement, the light snapped out Again all was darkness.

This darkness was not for long. When again the light appeared, it revealed a pair of hands. One hand gripped the light; the other held a pair of wire-cutters. The bars of the corral were wired into position. The man intended cutting those wires. Beyond doubt he had a confederate at the back of the corral who was ready, once the bars were down, to send the whole band of frightened horses thundering down the canyon trail in the night. It was a bold attempt, but these Mexican raiders were bold.

All this flew through Curlie's mind like a flash. The next instant his finger was on the trigger. There came a sharp crack. The light flared out.

Then again, save for the sound of stealthy movements in the dark, there was silence.

Curlie lost not one moment of time. He glided swiftly away to his right. Yet, quick as he had been, someone else was quicker. Suddenly above him there loomed the figure of a man, and in his hand there gleamed a knife. Curlie had shot the torch from the Mexican's hand and, baffled and enraged, the man had charged up the slope and, fortune being with him, had come directly upon the crouching boy.

For a second Curlie was frozen with fear; the next he was all action. There was not time to grasp his rifle and so defend himself. There was only an instant in which to do a whirling back somersault. As the Mexican lunged forward, his arm came sweeping down. His knife slashed into the pine needles; that was all. The next moment his broad sombrero was knocked down over his eyes; his arm was struck a violent blow that sent his knife whirling through the air. In the twinkle of an eye, Curlie had done all this. Then he turned to flee, but just a second too late. The

long arm of the Mexican swung about and, grasping him by his stout coat, sent him crashing to earth with such force as all but drove the senses from him. In the next instant he felt a crushing weight come hurtling down upon him. He lay face down upon the earth; the Mexican was on his back.

For full ten seconds he was unable to regain his senses. When at last he caught a gasping breath and attempted to move, he found that he might as well be buried beneath a mountain as to be held down by that burly Mexican. What was worse, he could feel the Mexican making stealthy movements with his hands. First to right, then to left, they groped about.

"Searching for his knife," Curlie thought in despair. "If he finds it I'm a goner. He'll stab me to the heart as though I were a toad."

The knife, however, appeared to be hard to find. Agonizing moments passed, Curlie frantically revolving plans of escape in his mind. He thought of his own sheath knife. This was out of reach of his hand. To struggle for posses-

sion of it would be but to call his assailant's attention to it and so bring his life to a more sudden end. His rifle, lying there somewhere in the bed of pine needles, was quite as useless. He would have shouted but had no breath for it; besides, this was as likely to bring foe as friend.

Now Curlie, though of slender build, was possessed of great strength of arm. As he lay there searching his mind for some means of escape and fearing every moment that the knife would be found and his life brought to a sudden end, his eyes caught, indistinctly in the space before him, the outline of some object. At first he thought it the hilt of the knife. This sent a thrill through his being. If it were the knife and he were able to grasp it, the victory would be his. This hope faded fast, for, as his eyes studied it, he found it to be but the stout root of a tree. Washed free of needles and earth by some freshet of rain, for a distance of a foot or more it bulged above the surface of the ground.

At once the boy's mind began to evolve another means of escape. The root was solid and

strong; at least, he had reason to hope it was. If only he could grasp it with both his hands, he felt sure that he might drag himself suddenly forward and so overturn his antagonist. But could he reach it? Would not the Mexican detect his movement and stop him? He could but try.

Stealthily he moved his right hand forward. So intent was the Mexican upon retrieving his knife he did not, for the moment, take note of the movement. Slowly, ever so slowly, the hand moved out over the bed of needles. Now it was a foot and a half from the root, now a foot, now six inches. And now the slender fingers grasped it.

A sigh of relief escaped the boy's nervous lips. The task, however, was but half completed. One hand was not enough. His left hand was partly doubled under him. The Mexican, in contempt of anything the frail boy could do, did not take any note of the slight movement that released the hand.

There was a flash of white as Curlie's left

hand shot forward. The next instant, as if riding a bucking bronco, the Mexican tilted forward to go tumbling back upon his neck. Then, hazarding all upon one stroke, the boy let out a bloodcurdling scream.

This scream was answered from a half dozen points at once. Soon there came breaking through the brush a brown-faced, tough-muscled cowboy, Clyde Hopkins, Curlie's partner. He was followed quickly by a slender, dark-eyed Mexican type of boy and a little later by three great slouching boys and a man who could not have been mistaken for any other than their father.

"What's up?" demanded this man. "Looks like you'd queered the game. Gone and drove 'em all off, hain't you, and us not shot 'em up any? That's a hot way to do. But what can you expect from a greener? Serves us right fer lettin' y'in on it."

Curlie turned white at this speech. He was fearfully angry. A moment before he had barely escaped death by the hand of a Mexican raider's knife, yet this man, this Pete Modder, who

was, Curlie suspected, no better than a rustler himself, blamed him for calling for help.

For ten full seconds he stood there speechless. His mad efforts to control himself at last successful, he turned about, picked up something from the ground and murmured, "Here's his knife. Some knife, I'd say."

To himself he was saying all the while: "Pete Modder, the time's not ripe for action yet. You think me green, do you? Well, in the end you won't. There'll be action enough, unless I miss my guess, and a lot of action that you won't particularly like. Watch me then."

All this, passing through his mind and not reaching the tip of his tongue, did no harm whatever and did help to soothe his wounded spirits.

"Guess there won't be anything more doing to-night," said the dark-eyed youth, who was the person of doubtful character, Ambrosio Chaves. "They know we're onto them. They won't come back. I'll lay out here by the corral.

The rest of you might as well get up to camp for a wink of sleep. Remember we're going after Old Baldie in the morning. And we'll get him too."

CHAPTER IV

CURLIE DOES SOME WIRE-TAPPING

A half hour later, in the camp that was hidden away beneath the overhanging boughs of great, spreading pine trees, Curlie lay warmly wrapped in blankets beneath a pup-tent. His faithful and trusted partner, Clyde Hopkins, lay at his side. Clyde was already asleep. Curlie was not. His experiences of the night had been enough to banish sleep. Twice within an hour he had leveled a rifle and shot at a fellow human being. Once during that same hour he had barely escaped death by a Mexican's keen-bladed knife. What boy, under these conditions, would have fallen asleep at once?

"I seem to have gotten the full force of the attack," he thought to himself. "None of the other boys appear to have had any exciting ex-

periences." For a moment there lurked in the back of his brain a suspicion that all was not well, that the wily Ambrosio had somehow come to know that he was a member of the Secret Service of the Air and that he was in this camp to discover the real motives of the men who lived in this mountain fastness with the avowed purpose of catching wild ponies. Had he been posted in this dangerous position that he might be killed by the Mexicans? Had the whole affair of the raid been a hoax? He had seen but two Mexicans. Had they been hired to pull a fake raid and kill him?

These questions set his hair on end. Why, if his suspicions were true, then he was not for a single moment safe in this camp. His life was in constant danger.

For a short space of time, so overwrought were his feelings at these thoughts, he felt that he must rise and flee. A calmer counsel held him at his post. Beside him was one honest and brave fellow whom he could trust. One such was a match for three rascals. Besides, there was lit-

tle danger that Ambrosio really knew anything of his mission in camp.

Had Curlie not been kept awake by these thoughts, he would surely have forced himself to stay awake, for he had a piece of secret work which he wished very much to do. Now, at night, when the gleaming, prying eyes of Ambrosio were not about, was the opportune time. As soon as he could feel sure that the others were asleep, he would be up and doing. In the meantime there was space for thought.

Doubtless you have been wondering what was Curlie's real position in this strange camp. It will take but a few words to make the matter clear. Having received the Whisperer's message regarding mysterious affairs that were about to come off up on the mountain, he had at once gone to the ranch where Clyde Hopkins was to be found and had easily persuaded him to go along on a trip into the mountain country with the purpose of joining, if possible, the band of men who were planning to trap wild horses. The joining of the band had been absurdly easy. The

trap, to be built of heavy poles, was scarcely begun. Since, as the Whisperer had hinted, the men of the band were not fond of hard work, Curlie and Clyde had been let in for a lion's share of it. They had laughed this off and had professed to be greatly interested in the game of wild horse hunting. And, indeed, so they were. Neither of them had ever participated in such a hunt and a wild, racing game it had proved to be.

In the last three days they had trapped nineteen little yellow and brown ponies, real wild horses of the mountains. But, to Curlie's surprise, while the greater part of their band was engaged in this business, two or three others were always away at night and were constantly returning with from two to three fine, handsome colts, which were, it is true, quite as unbranded as the yellow ponies, but of a far superior breed. They promised in a year or two to make horses of some value and, though they came beyond doubt off the open range, gave evidence of having been watched and cared for.

When Ambrosio caught Curlie looking at

these in surprise, he hastened to assure him that they had been bought by members of his party to fill out a car of horses. This Curlie did not believe. He felt sure that they were being stolen from the ranges at night. He could not, however, prove it. Some of the party might have money or credit to buy colts, but if this were true he had no evidence of it. It was this circumstance that had made him certain that his presence as a member of the Secret Service was greatly needed right here. So he was biding his time. Just what moves he would make when the time was ripe, he had not as yet decided.

Just at this time there had come into their camp vague rumors of danger. The rumors soon took the shape of an anticipated raid upon the corral by a band of outlaw Mexicans. That meant that Ambrosio and his band must fight for the horses they had gotten by what seemed questionable methods, or must give them up to ancient enemies, rival raiders. This, they had informed Curlie, they were not willing to do. Then they had asked him if he and his pal Clyde

would stay by them and help fight their battles.

To this question he had made an evasive answer. He wanted time to think it over. It had been a trying moment for him. It was one thing to run wild horses in the forest with a band of men who appeared to be of doubtful character, and whose actions he was watching as a member of the service; it was quite another to join them in a battle with some enemy. Suppose they were lying to him? What if, instead of an attack from rival raiders, this were a raid led by deputy marshals, who had caught up with Ambrosio and his men and were determined to bring them to justice. Where would he, Curlie, be then? He would show up fine lifting his rifle in defense of lawless men when the officers of the law were on their track.

Long had he pondered the problem. Many were the questions he had asked of the treacherous Ambrosio. At last he had become convinced that the lawless leader was telling the truth. He had then promised that, should the raid come, he would do his part in defense of the camp.

Indeed, this was the only thing he could do. He was there to gather evidence against the band with whom he was for the moment associated. The horses in the corral were the best of evidence. If he were to permit these horses to be driven away into the barren hills to the south by a band of lawless Mexicans, his evidence would vanish and his case be lost. It was up to him to fight. And fight he did. It had not been much of a raid. He had a suspicion that it was but the forerunner of a real raid which might come off the next night, or two or three nights later, a raid in which many Mexicans would take part and much blood be shed. During the present night, he felt that he had conducted himself in a manner such as could but reflect honor upon himself, and might help to shield him from any possible suspicion which might lurk in the mind of the wary Ambrosio as to his real reason for being in camp.

"And now," he yawned, as he finished thinking these things through, "now for a little work that will put me in touch with the outside world."

Gliding noiselessly out of the tent, he dodged from tree to tree until he came to one larger and taller than all the rest. Here for a moment he stood gazing upward. Gleaming from one of the upper branches of this tree to those of one to the right, were three parallel wires, the aerials of a radiophone. These were Ambrosio's wires, not Curlie's. In Ambrosio's tent there was a fairly powerful portable sending and receiving set. By the aid of this equipment he was able to keep in touch with many points, not alone in the United States but also in Mexico. In the back room of many a pool hall and drinking place of doubtful repute there were radio sets for sending and receiving messages which might well have been coveted by institutions of greater reputation. Many times these were operated in secret. Any message that might come from Ambrosio there on the mountain would be quickly and surely dispatched from these secret stations.

Curlie knew all this, though he knew little enough about the location of these stations. "Here's where I go in for a little wire-tapping

on my own," he whispered to himself, as after glancing about and listening for a moment to make doubly sure he was not observed, he felt of a coil of wire in his pocket, then, catching the lower limb of a giant fir tree, swung up to lose himself from view in the dark depth of needle-laden boughs.

Ambrosio's aerials were not attached to the tree which he was climbing, but to the next one at the right. After climbing to the level of these aerials, Curlie began creeping out upon a broad-spreading limb that touched the tips of the one across from it. This was dangerous business. Suspended in midair some seventy feet from the ground, he was in immediate danger of being crashed to earth. Once the bough cracked ominously. For an instant his heart was in his mouth. Then, reassured, he again ventured out a foot or two. Ambrosio's aerial was now all but within his grasp. Reaching unsteadily to the branch above him, he balanced himself as with the other hand he tried for a grasp at the aerial. The first and second

attempts were futile and left him breathless. The third was successful. He was able to draw the wires toward him a distance of a foot or two. Having done this, he twined his feet about the branch he was on and, loosing his hold upon the upper branch, he began a breathless juggling that might enable him to attach a wire to the aerials. For full five minutes he struggled. During all this time there was a question whether he would succeed in keeping his balance or would go plunging to earth.

At last with a deep sigh of relief and whispered, "Ah! There!" he loosened his grip upon the aerials, allowed them to settle back to normal position, then unrolling a wire after him, proceeded to creep back to a place of safety in a crotch of the tree. The wire he uncoiled was dark brown in color and blended perfectly with the bark of the tree. At this height it could not be detected from the ground.

"But if Ambrosio takes his aerials down before I disconnect my tapping wire," he breathed, "then, man, oh, man!"

"Ho, well," he sighed, "in this little game you have to take chances. And, after all, you don't take them so much for yourself as you do for others, for the innocent ones who suffer if the selfish evaders of the law are not brought to bay and punished. There is some satisfaction in that."

As he crept down the tree he unwound the wire, taking great care to conceal it, in so far as it was possible, behind clinging moss and loose strips of bark. Once upon the ground, he thrust the wire beneath the bed of needles and in this manner brought it to his tent. Hidden beneath the dry depths of needles beneath his bed was a miniature, peanut bulb listening-in set of considerable power.

"Now," he whispered, with a sigh of satisfaction, as he hooked the wire to his instruments, "I am in a position to listen in on any little message which may come to our crafty friend Ambrosio, and I can catch any message which may be whispered to me, providing I am listening at the right time. There's some comfort in being

connected up with the outside world once more. If only the gang doesn't get onto it I hope to get considerable excitement out of it, and if they do, why then I'll get a lot of excitement out of it of an entirely different sort."

Having delivered this bit of philosophy to the night air, he rolled himself in his blankets and settled back for three winks before dawn.

"It's a fairly exciting life," he told himself dreamily, "exciting and quite entertaining. I'd like —"

Just here he drifted off to the land of dreams and was unconscious of the old world's doings until Clyde prodded him in the ribs and informed him that it was broad day and that things were doing; that this was to be the most exciting chase of all, for on this day Old Baldie was to be brought down the canyon and delivered to the corral.

"Maybe so," Curlie muttered sleepily, "but I gotta be showed. Old Baldie is foxy, foxy as a horse could be made."

CHAPTER V

A RACE FOR A RARE PRIZE

With the wild tang of the mountain forest air in his nostrils, Curlie mounted his sturdy blue pony and followed the others up the trail. For a few hours at least he could forget his problems and dangers. Each day, as they raced away after wild ponies, he had been able to forget all but the chase. And to-day it was to be for Old Baldie.

Old Baldie, as they had come to call him, and as he had been known for some two years by men who rode up the blazed trail of the mountain, was more than a little yellow mustang. He was a real horse, a sorrel stallion with a white spot between his eyes, and he had been watched and admired from afar by many a hunter, prospector or rambler of lonely places. Where he had come from no one seemed to know. He was

not branded. A cowboy had once stolen close upon him and discovered that. He was the property of the man who captured him. Thus far he had remained his own master. Time and again he had been all but within a corral. Indeed Ambrosio himself claimed to have had him within the very wings of a trap. Then, to Ambrosio's astonishment, he had silently vanished.

"A Diabla!" was the Mexican's description of him. But to the passionate young Ambrosio Old Baldie was a creature who defied his strategy and so but led him on to more daring attempts. To mount himself upon the back of Baldie, to go riding across the desert, envied and admired by all of his kind, that was one of Ambrosio's fondest dreams.

The trap he had supervised this time had been built with Old Baldie in mind. Baldie and his band of ponies, some eight or ten in number, fed on the edges of a narrow valley through which a stream of crystal water gleamed like a silver ribbon. The stream was never dry, so Baldie's band was never thirsty. The grass, green and

luscious in summer, waved invitingly all winter long and gave them ample forage. At the bottom of this valley was a narrow ravine. Through this ravine, when chased too closely, Baldie was wont to lead his little band. Once they had passed over the steep and narrow trail through this ravine they might lose themselves in the forests that lined the sloping hills beyond. Once there, not a human being nor any wild creature could ever find them.

Ambrosio, after bringing together a great heap of willow and aspen poles and short evergreen saplings, had built a trap in this ravine. Beginning with a pole fence forming wings on either side that ran quite up to the rugged walls of granite, he gradually narrowed the space between these wings until there was little more than room for the well-trodden path. Down this neck the ponies were rushed.

With an idea that they might, as of old, pass through the gorge and out into wider spaces beyond, they would not falter. But this narrow neck of poles came to a sudden halt in a high-

walled corral. This corral was some thirty feet across. The walls were twelve feet high, built of strong poles lashed by heavy wire from tree to tree. Once a horse was within these walls and the gap by which he had entered had been closed with stout bars, it did not seem within the bounds of reason that he might escape. That was the way Ambrosio had thought about it as he had rubbed his hands in high glee at the completing of the trap.

Ambrosio, however, though he knew a great deal about horses, knew very little about Baldie. One may not be able to escape from a trap once he is in it, but he may succeed in staying out of the trap. That, thus far, was exactly what Baldie had succeeded in doing. There were other small bands of wild horses feeding on the edges of this same long, narrow valley. Some of these had fallen into Ambrosio's trap. Not Baldie.

Three times he had been seen sunning his flowing mane on some lofty promontory, but never had he been approached. These glimpses

had but maddened the master raider. He had spurred on his men, and to-day they had resolved that if not one single other horse entered the wings of their corral, Baldie should.

It was Clyde Hopkins who first sighted Baldie. It was fortunate for the wishes of Ambrosio that it was so. Born and bred a cowboy, cool, strong, sinewy and brown, a trained and fearless rider, Clyde would drive Baldie into the trap if anyone could. Clyde had one quality which none of the band save Curlie possessed — a clean and honest soul. Prize this ever so lightly as many may, when it comes to a great undertaking there is no other quality that so fits a boy or man to persevere and endure. Not goody-goody, but strong, honest and true, that was Clyde Hopkins.

Ambrosio and Clyde had ridden off up the valley together. The others had been stationed in the low timber just above the trap. When they heard the shout of the drivers they were to mount and race along on either side of the fleeing ponies to guide them into the trap. Their task, for the present, was but to wait. To Clyde

and Ambrosio was given the business of hunting out the quarry and of sending them racing toward the trap.

They had divided when but halfway up the valley. From this point they mounted the sloping sides of hills that lined the valley and, their eyes and ears ever alert for signs of wild horses, rode on in concealment.

When Clyde saw this monarch of the little valley realm, Baldie, it was to start and stare. He had been slowly moving forward over a soft mantle of pine needles for fifteen minutes. Not a sound had escaped from him or from the footsteps of his pony. Then, of a sudden, somewhere below him he caught a gleam of gold. What it was he for the instant did not know. What he thought it was caused him to gasp.

Silently drawing his pony's rein over his head, he dropped upon the soft mantled earth and, leaving his mount standing motionless, crept forward on hands and knees. Then it was that, creeping around a low-grown silver fir, he first caught sight of Baldie.

The sight caused him to sit staring motionless for the space of one full minute. Partly concealed in the brush, with his head erect and eyes staring away at the opposite hillside where Ambrosio must be riding in search of him, the stallion made a picture that the boy would not soon forget. Such a glimmer of gold as was his glossy coat! Such roundness of shoulders! Such curve of neck! Such dark, flashing eyes! Such graceful, tapering limbs!

During that whole minute, the boy sat staring and reasoning within himself. Should he back away and, pretending that he had never seen the splendid fellow, ride on in silence, or should he return to his horse and attempt to head him toward the trap?

His love for wild free things held out valiantly, but in time his love of conquest, the hope that somehow he might secure this noble beast for his own, caused him to back away to his pony and consider what to do.

A moment later, he let out such a wild Indian whoop as sent echoes racing from hill to hill and

startled the wild horse into plunging down the slope.

It was this sudden, wild whoop that was Baldie's undoing. Had he in the least suspected that there was an enemy behind him, he would have stepped gracefully about to right or left and would have quickly lost himself in the forests above. Totally surprised, he dashed downward to the valley below. Heading for the opposite slope, he was met by Ambrosio's wildly plunging pony. It was soon that he found himself surrounded by a racing, shouting band of men.

Even so, he outdistanced them all with a speed that was amazing. Then, as the valley narrowed, seeming to sense his danger, he turned and tried the bank at the right. Once, twice, three times he plunged upward, each time to fall back. The bank here was too steep, the sides too thickly strewn with loose dirt and shale. He could not make it. Then, with one defiant snort, he headed straight down between the wings into the trap.

From the lips of Ambrosio there came such a shout of triumph as caused Clyde to wish that he had crept away and left the monarch free in his realm. There was something in this dark-eyed youth's nature that Clyde did not like. Just what that was, he could not for the moment tell. He was soon enough to know.

For the moment, however, every thought was given by the horsemen to one affair, that of striving to be the first after Baldie into the narrow neck of the trap.

Spur and lash their ponies as they might, not one of them could outdistance Curlie Carson and his Canary. Having been but a watcher by the trail until now, he swung about and dashed forward at a rate that rivaled that of the monarch himself. After him came Clyde, closely followed by the wild Ambrosio. So, only three lengths apart, they came plunging after the prize.

Hardly had the wild horse reached the end of the corral when these three riders crowded the gap that lay between him and freedom. Expecting him to turn and charge before they could

dismount and put up the bars, they held their places in saddle and waited in breathless suspense.

With a wild snort the wonder horse came up short, to rear back upon his haunches. He was then not three feet from the lower end of the corral. Then with a wild sweep of mane and tail he whirled three times about the enclosure. This done, he paused and stood with head bowed like a man in deep thought.

Just then Clyde, thinking of the bars, was about to dismount, when a strange movement on the part of the wild horse caused him to halt with one foot in the stirrup. Baldie had walked up to the upper side of the enclosure, and, with movement as dainty as any woman, had put out a foot to test the poles. This, he repeated three times. Each time his foot went higher on the poles. Then, with an unrivaled ease and grace, he swung upon his hind feet and placed his fore-feet against the poles. Clyde gasped as he saw how far up the poles these feet reached.

If he had gasped at this motion, the next move

set his senses reeling, for, with all the grace of a trick horse of the circus, the bold Baldie sprang straight upward. Catching at the poles with both pairs of feet, slipping, but ever climbing, he came at last to the top rail. There for one awe-inspiring moment he hung suspended in air. Then his head and forelegs plunged over, his body swayed backward and forward, at last to plunge to earth on the other side. For a second, as if stunned, he lay there motionless. Then with a mighty leap he was upon his feet and away like a shot.

"Oh! Ah!" sighed Curlie, as if he were witnessing a wonderful stunt in a circus.

"Well, I'll be jig——"

This exclamation of Clyde's was cut short by the action of Ambrosio. A short carbine was fastened to his saddle. Quickly unleashing this he whirled it about and pointed it square at the fleeing horse. In the next second he would have sent a soft-nosed bullet into the splendid beast's quivering flesh.

Just as his finger touched the trigger, his rifle

shot upward and the bullet cut the tree tops. The next instant found him upon the ground glaring up at Clyde, who had knocked him from his horse.

Such a look of dark rage as was on Ambrosio's face, Curlie Carson had not seen on any face before.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, glaring up at Clyde.

"I mean," said Clyde, through straight, set lips, "that you can't do a thing like that while I'm about. A man who shoots a horse is a murderer, a beast. You may be a beast but I'd advise you to keep it to yourself."

"If I can't have him, neither can anyone else. I'll shoot him on sight."

"Do it when I'm not around," said Clyde firmly.

"I'll kill anyone or anything that crosses my will," exclaimed Ambrosio, flaring up into another violent rage.

Realizing that speech was useless with such a rage-crazed person, Clyde dropped the reins of

his pony over his arm and followed Curlie Carson out of the enclosure.

For full five minutes they walked along in silence.

"Well," laughed Clyde at last, "sort of made him show himself up, didn't I?"

"I'll say. Look out for him. He — he's dangerous," stammered Curlie.

"Think so?" drawled Clyde. "Well, maybe so — maybe so. I'm not afraid of him. Let him do his worst."

"Say!" exclaimed Curlie, changing the subject, "the day is still young. What say we go to the top?"

"Top of the mountain?"

"Sure."

"Man, that's a hard climb!"

"I know it, but I've never climbed a mountain and besides there's something I'd like to look into. My intuition tells me I might get sight of something up there above the timber line that will help me to answer some questions."

"Got anything to do with those unbranded

colts that we didn't catch in our trap but are in Ambrosio's corral?" asked Clyde.

"You're a good mind-reader," grinned Curlie. "It might have."

"All right, then I'm with you," exclaimed Clyde. "If there's anything a cowboy hates it's walking, and I'm one of 'em, but this is worth the hike, so lead on."

In the meantime Old Baldie had lost himself in the rugged slopes that lay below the camp and Ambrosio had returned to his tent to sulk. Had he known what things the outlaw horse was yet to do, he might have loaded his heaviest rifle and gone gunning for him at that very moment. And had Clyde known what Baldie was to do for him, he would have been ten times more willing to defend him.

CHAPTER VI

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY

Their ponies took them but a short two miles toward the peak. After that they tethered them in a spot where rich grass was abundant, and started directly up a narrow, blazed trial that was more a path than a trail. This path led in a steep and tortuous way through virgin timber to the timber line, beyond which no trees could grow.

Never in all his life had Curlie found himself in a more delightful spot than was this mountain forest. The cool, damp smell all about him, the distant rush of a stream over a rocky bed, the towering pines and firs, the steep upward slope that challenged their powers and beckoned them on, all these went far toward making the hour of that climb the most perfect he had known.

If the timber had been enchanting, the top of the mountain was enchantment itself with a thrill; for here, above the timber, where grass and flowers grew in luxuriant abundance, where mountain quail went whirring away against the sun, where a red fox, unafraid, came out to chatter at them, they could gaze away to their right and see in the hazy distances, not alone forests and farms, but deserts, cities and the snow-white peaks of many another mountain.

Above the timber line the mountain spread out into a plateau which was miles in extent. This plateau was all thickly covered with grass.

"What a pasture!" exclaimed Curlie.

"Something's been feeding here," said Clyde, stooping over and examining the grass.

"What do you think it was?"

"Might be mountain sheep, moose, elk, or it might be—"

Again he bent low to examine some tracks in a soft swampy spot. "Was horses," he said

slowly. "Now what do you make of that? What horses could they be?"

Since for the moment there was no logical solution of the question, Curlie proposed that they make their way on toward the summit.

"Looks as if there were some fair sized stones at the top," he said.

"Stones! Man, them's boulders," exclaimed Clyde, "big as houses! You couldn't any more climb up one of them than you could a stone wall. It's farther up there than you think. That's why they look small. But come on; since we must do it, let's get the agony over with as soon as possible."

Clyde led the way up the grassy slope.

An hour later they were struggling pantingly forward over jagged granite boulders of prodigious size, making their last final struggle to reach the very topmost point.

"View must be grand from there," panted Curlie.

"Ought to be," Clyde panted back; "enough trouble to get up there. My back's about

broke, and as for my legs, they won't have a joint left to-morrow. But come on, let's go."

With a final effort, he at last stepped out upon a boulder that, surrounded by three others slightly higher, formed a sort of giant speaker's platform from which it seemed the whole world might be surveyed.

Curlie's gaze circled and circled as it took in forests in the distance and plains far beyond. A blue lake glimmered at their feet. Its level surface was some two thousand feet below. The desert sand gleamed away to the south. Curlie, who had never witnessed anything half so grand, was entranced by it all.

Not so Clyde. His gaze, roving for a moment, had at length come to rest upon a spot on the green mountain-top plateau.

"What are they, I'd like to know," he murmured absent-mindedly to himself.

"What's what?" asked Curlie.

"Something feeding away down there to the left."

Curlie's eyes were directed to a dark brown

spot in the midst of the sea of green. "I wouldn't know," he said thoughtfully. "This is not my world. It's yours, though. You should be able to tell."

"That's right, I should," laughed Clyde. "And I think I know. It's horses. Nothing else feeds just like a horse. I've been watching them. It's horses all right. But how'd they come here?"

"Why, I know!" exclaimed Curlie suddenly. "I had about forgotten it. Couple of weeks ago I picked up a radio message that was being sort of broadcasted. Some dry-farmer was inviting his friends and neighbors, irrigation farmers and dry-farmers, to enter into a contract with him to pasture their extra horses and colts on the plateau of this very mountain. He said they would get them together in a drove and hire some men to drive them up here and keep a watch over them. It seems that the land could be leased from the government cheap."

"Well, the deal evidently went through,"

said Clyde slowly. "A lot of farmers must have gone into it; five hundred head down there. Feed enough for 'em, too." He was speaking in a thoughtful tone now. "Fine scheme, only — "

"By Jinks!" he exclaimed suddenly, "that explains something — a whole lot of things." In his excitement he began to hop about on his perilous roost in a manner that caused Curlie to fear for his safety.

"What does it explain?" asked Curlie when he had quieted down.

"It tells me plain as day that our friend Ambrosio and his bunch are a pretty gang of horse thieves."

"Did you just begin to suspect that?" asked Curlie, smiling.

"Sure. Did you know it all the time?" Clyde looked at him so fiercely that it seemed he might pitch Curlie into the lake two thousand feet below if the answer was yes.

"No," said Curlie slowly. "I haven't known it all the time and don't know it now. Neither

do you. I have suspected it, same as you do now. I thought I'd wait until you said you suspected it before I told you the whole of my game."

"I don't just suspect it now. I know it," declared Clyde stoutly. "Know it so blamed well that I am willing to ride my pony down to Mogordo to-night and bring up a posse of deputies to arrest the whole bunch of 'em. And if you don't come along, you'll get pinched along with 'em."

Curlie threw back his shoulders and laughed. "Clyde," he smiled, "I'm a member of the Secret Service of the Air. Every move I make is known by men high up in authority. They know what I am doing and trust me. If I'm arrested to-day I am a free boy to-morrow. So who cares about that?"

"What's the Secret Service of the Air?" asked Clyde.

"Sit down there and I'll tell you."

Clyde sat down on the rocky rim of the top of the world and there, for the first time,

learned many of the secrets of that magnificent organization that was working night and day to keep the air free for the use of honest and just men.

"That's a fine organization," he exclaimed when Curlie had finished. "Like to belong to it myself."

"You're in its service now — my right-hand man," said Curlie heartily, slapping him on the shoulder. "And since you are will you kindly tell me how you know our friend Ambrosio and his men are horse rustlers?"

"That's easy," laughed Clyde. "Every morning there are two or three fine unbranded colts in the corral that weren't there the night before. Ain't that right?"

"Sure is."

"And them colts ain't wild pony colts, nor they ain't mountain colts at all — too soft and smooth-skinned for that. They've been winter-fed and mebby sheltered. Where'd they come from? Think Ambrosio came up here and bought 'em the way he says he does? Not a

bit of it. Ambrosio hain't got no money an' if he had he'd never spend it for colts that he thought he could steal.

"Why!" he exclaimed, rising and making his boot heels ring on the granite floor, "it's as simple as two and two. Every night they wander up this way and pick off two or three stray colts. Only one watchman, and him half asleep, can't keep an eye on the whole five hundred in the dark. You couldn't mebby get away with a big bunch, but two or three, that's easy.

"If it was a regular drover's bunch they'd all be branded, but these farmers, with only three or four apiece, what do they know about brands?

"Worst of it is," he stormed, "they're robbing poor people who sometimes hain't got enough of anything to see 'em through the winter. Dry farmin' ain't no cinch and irrigation's just as bad until you get a good start. Send for the deputies and have 'em pinched right now and at once, them's my sentiments."

"Well," said Curlie thoughtfully, "that's one way to do it, of course. But at present we haven't any proof, not real proof, that they haven't bought them. Besides, if they have been stealing them, there'll be a gun battle and some good honest deputies will more than likely be killed. I wouldn't like that.

"I —" he hesitated — "I've sort of had a plan in my head. Wonder how it will strike you?"

"Shoot," said Clyde, settling himself back on the rock. "I'm listening."

For fifteen minutes Curlie spoke slowly, thoughtfully, of a plan he had worked out. From time to time Clyde interrupted to offer suggested changes. When he had finished, his companion reached over and patted him on the head.

"Some bean you've got, Curlie, old boy," he complimented. "Believe it will work and it'll be a heap of fun. Won't they open their eyes? But, say, it is time we were gettin' down out of here. See them clouds off to the west?

That means a storm, and a storm on a mountain peak has got an Arctic blizzard beat four ways."

Leaping from the rocky crow's-nest perch to a boulder below, he made his way swiftly downward. He was followed by Curlie, who kept an interested eye turned toward the storm. Little he guessed then what a mountain storm of the near future would mean to him. Had he known, he might have watched this one even more closely.

CHAPTER VII

"THE RAIDERS! THE RAIDERS!"

That night, as he lay beneath his blankets, with his radiophone headpiece securely clamped about his ears, Curlie Carson received two messages which, to say the least, made his position in the camp of Ambrosio more hazardous and lessened the chances of the plan which he and Clyde had worked out on the mountain.

If Ambrosio was still disappointed because of his failure to capture the king of wild horses, he did not show it as they all sat down to a hearty meal of fresh meat that to Curlie tasted suspiciously like elk steak. "And that in spite of the fact that the season on elk is closed," he told himself. "I'll say my little pals are some real sports. Law doesn't mean anything to them. But we'll see if we can't give them a little respect for it in the near future."

Ambrosio seemed to have quite forgotten the

fact that Clyde had prevented him from shooting the horse he had failed to capture, for he appeared desirous of becoming quite chummy with the cowboy. He discussed with him the probability of a storm, the advisability of constructing another corral farther up the ravine and ended by inviting him to join in a game of cards.

Clyde excused himself at this point and walked up to the horse-trap. This trap was a full mile from the corral where the captured horses were kept. The trap was on a ravine through which a trail ran and up which from time to time prospectors, fishermen and sightseers might be expected to travel. The corral in which the horses were kept was up a dark little ravine which ended in a steep and rocky wall. No one ever came that way. In fact, it would be hard to imagine a darker and more forbidding spot. Surrounded by black pine trees, frowned down upon by overhanging cliffs, this corral seemed a fitting place for some sort of battle.

"Shouldn't wonder but that in ages long gone some Indian tribe made its last stand in that dark hole," Clyde told himself as he climbed a rugged slope on his way to the horse-trap.

There was one matter which he wished to clear up. That king of wild horses had performed a feat that up until that moment he had believed impossible; he had climbed a twelve-foot fence of poles.

"Wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it. There's one point I want to know about, though. That's just what I'm going to look into right now."

In a short time he was standing within the trap.

"I thought so," he murmured as he stepped up close to the upper side of the pen. "Slants away from the center. Trees the poles are fastened to lean up hill. Most trees do. That gave the old boy a little advantage. Something like climbing a reclining ladder. Horses do that in the circus. But I bet they never tackled

as steep a one as this. Never had as good a reason, though. Wouldn't want to be Ambrosio's horse myself. He's got no heart; not for horses, at least. Think of his wanting to kill that beautiful creature to-day, just because he was running away. And the daring old fellow was running to reclaim the freedom that, as far as we are concerned, belongs to him."

Turning about, he climbed out of the trap, struck down the hill and, a few moments later, joined Curlie in his tent. Curlie was beneath his blankets, with head half buried, pretending to sleep but in reality listening in. When Clyde thrust aside the flaps of the tent, Curlie made a quick move beneath the blankets. Then, seeing it was Clyde, he dropped back into his place and held up a warning finger for silence.

"Getting something," he whispered. "Mighty queer. Been repeated three times. Meant for our friend Ambrosio, but I can't make it out."

"Here, write it down," whispered Clyde, producing pencil and notebook. "I'm more used to this Mexican and Indian talk and their queer

names than you are. Maybe I can make it look like sense."

Curlie scribbled for a moment, then handed the notebook to his companion.

Switching on a flashlight, Clyde studied the writing for some moments in silence. This is what he read:

"Sepriano Gonzales, Enselmo Garcia, Baz Peone and Yiacero. Devil's Door Step, to-morrow at ten bells."

"Well," he whispered at last, "far's I can make out, Ambrosio's going to have reinforcements. Coming to-morrow night. That looks as if we were about to hit for the dry and dusty desert soon, and then away to the rugged fastnesses where an ordinary man hasn't any business to go. Two Indians and two Mexicans will meet Ambrosio at the Devil's Door Step to arrange terms by which these four new rascals are to pilot our own gang of precious rogues across the border with their booty. That's coming off to-morrow night at ten p. m. Those fellows, never having been to sea, don't

know a thing about bells, but they put it in for an artistic touch all the same."

"Devil's Door Step," whispered Curlie thoughtfully.

"That's a rocky shelf about a mile over here to the right, just over the first ridge and up a bit."

"What sort of place is it?" asked Curlie, sitting up and forgetting about the danger of being discovered with the headpiece over his ears.

"Oh, pretty rocky."

"Any caves?"

"Not exactly caves, but there is a deep cut in the rocks above it. I've heard there were sometimes bear in there."

"You see," Curlie said grinning, "It doesn't suit me to —

"Just a minute," he broke off. "Getting something." Then, as if remembering his position, he sank down deep beneath the blankets. Clyde turned about and sat by the door of the tent that he might offer Curlie any needed pro-

tection from those who might wish to spy upon him.

The message Curlie was getting was from the Whisperer. She had never before seemed so close. It was as if she were whispering in his very ear. Never before had he wished so heartily for his radio-compass that he might chart her location.

"Some day I'll find you," he whispered, as he heard her twice repeated "Hello, hello, Curlie, are you there?

"Listen, Curlie," the whisper was low and tense, "you are in great peril. If it wasn't for the fact that you are serving many people who need your service very much, I would ask you to come away from the mountain. But you will be very, very careful, won't you, Curlie? They are treacherous, bad men, Curlie. To-morrow night others will come. They are even more daring than the rest. I wanted to tell you that. I do hope you have found a way out.

"Listen, Curlie, would you like to know very

much who I am and where I live? Here's a promise, then: If you get out of this safe, you'll see me and speak to me. I promise it. Good-bye, Curlie. And, oh, please do be careful!"

Little drops of cold perspiration stood out on Curlie's nose as he drew the receiver from his head and sat up. Never in all his experiences with the Whisperer had he caught in her whisper such a note of seriousness, a seriousness that was akin to fear, as he had in this whisper of this night.

"I guess we have got to play our cards about right," he told himself. "But there's a promised prize; and it is some prize! I am to see the Whisperer, to speak to her face to face, to —"

His thought was suddenly broken off by three shots in rapid succession.

"That's the signal!" exclaimed Clyde. "It's the raiders! The Mexican raiders! They're back already. Who'd have thought they'd come two nights in succession?"

In a twinkle of an eye, armed to the teeth, they were gliding cautiously down the bank that led to the corral in which were enclosed not alone the captured wild ponies and the colts which had appeared so mysteriously, but their own ponies as well.

"Have to defend Canary from the raiders," Curlie told himself, "if nothing more. But it's our game to keep the stolen horses in the corral until the show-down. If these rank outsiders, these Mexican raiders who are doing their best to carry off the whole bunch of them, succeed in driving them into the desert, then into the rock-piles beyond, where is our evidence gone? Gone to the wind, and Canary with it."

CHAPTER VIII

CLYDE WOUNDED

This second threatening of a night raid on their corral puzzled Curlie. When the first one had been pulled off he had thought it something of an accident; a little band of raiders, perhaps only three or four in number, had chanced upon their corral and, thinking Ambrosio and his band to be some honest trader and trapper of wild horses, had decided that here was easy picking. When they had put up a stiff defense, he had supposed that these Mexicans would move on up the valley or over the mountain where the pastures were greener and the watchmen not so well armed nor so vigilant.

And yet here they were again. Three shots in quick succession had been agreed upon as a signal by their guard. There had been a scream. What this last might mean, he could

not tell, but that the battle was on he did not doubt, for up from the run there came again the quick rat-tat-tat of an automatic.

One question entered his mind: Had the two Mexicans and the Indians, who were to be met by Ambrosio on the next night, decided to double-cross Ambrosio and to drive the horses away to the rough land, leaving Ambrosio to hold an empty bag? If this were not true, then how had a strong band of Mexicans come upon the corral in this dark and secluded run? There could be but one answer: Ambrosio had been indiscreet in his sending of radio messages and had given his location away.

"More than likely some of those Mexicans have their radio-compasses and know as well how to use them as we do," he whispered to himself as, having buckled on his two automatics and looked to the clip in his rifle, he stole forth into the night.

The camp fire had been damped with ashes and earth. No light coming from this would give his position away. The moon, however,

was just rising above the mountains to the right and was sending yellow bars of light across the open spaces between trees.

"Bad!" he murmured to himself, "very bad. Take a pot-shot at me if I don't look out, and that will be the end of the adventures of Curlie Carson."

Dropping on hands and knees, he crept toward the corral. Clyde had already disappeared in the dark. Over to the right a revolver popped; to the left an automatic rifle went spit-spit-spat. It was with a creepy feeling that he moved forward. He could not help wondering how it felt to have a bullet strike you. He had heard it described and read in books about it, but he wondered how it really did feel.

"Might know soon enough," he told himself. Then he began to wonder if the game was really worth the cost.

"Wouldn't be if it were all for myself," he whispered, "but when it's for others, that's different. That's —"

He had heard a metallic click off to the left.

Hardly had he dropped behind a giant fir than a rifle cracked and a bullet spat against the tree.

"Getting hot," he told himself, as, with steady nerve, he swung his rifle about to answer the Mexican's call.

"Bing-bang!" His rifle sounded like a cannon in his ears. Hardly had he dropped flat when a second bullet sang over his head.

"Some places I've been that I like better than this one," he told himself, as, leaping to his feet, he dashed down the hill, a dozen feet at each step.

As for Clyde, he was more accustomed to these battles of the border than was Curlie. Once he had left the tent, he glided directly down the hill toward the corral and did not stop until he was in full view of two Mexicans who were bent over letting down the last rails of a section of the corral fence. There was a disturbance among the horses as if some stranger was attempting to drive them toward the gap in the fence.

"Shots made 'em panicky," Clyde told himself. "If ever they get outside the corral, seven Indian demons couldn't hold 'em. Can't let 'em get out, that's all."

Dropping flat upon the earth, he rested his rifle across a branch of a young fir tree, then lay there motionless. He was straining his eyes, trying to make out something. He braced himself on one elbow that he might see better. That he was in great danger of being spotted, he knew well, but, born and bred on the plains, he was equal to such a situation.

The horses, urged on from behind, moved toward the gap. As the foremost of them prepared for a dash for freedom, with a wild look in his eyes and with a mad, defiant snort, he leaped forward.

Then it was that Clyde's rifle cracked four times in quick succession. Strange to say, his bullets were not directed at the Mexicans waiting in the gap, nor at the one urging the horses on, but over the head of the horse-leader.

That leader was Clyde's own pony, Colie.

He was trained for many things. Time and again when there was danger of one sort or another about, Clyde had shot over his head to warn him back. As the bullets now sang close to his ears, he plunged backward. Instantly there was a panic among the horses that sent them rushing backward into the depths of the corral. So sudden and terrific was this rush that it did not seem possible for the one who had been urging them forward to escape from their trampling feet. Naturally enough, this did not trouble Clyde. He had matters of his own to attend to. The horses, now in a genuine panic, would doubtless come surging back as soon as they had crashed against the upper wall of the corral and had found it holding firm. Some way he must reach that gap and close it. But the two Mexicans were to be accounted for. True, they had disappeared, but Clyde knew all too well that they were lying in wait for him.

With the suddenness characteristic of a cowboy, he decided to rush them. That would be the last thing they would expect.

A wild whoop rent the air as with an automatic in either hand he dashed down the slope. There came a scream of alarm, a shot rang out, then he aimed an automatic at a fleeting shadow and emptied the gun without pausing in his mad dash.

It was enough; the Mexicans had flown. With the characteristic speed of a born corral builder, he replaced the first eight poles, then dropped back into the shadows to wait. Then it was for the first time that he noticed there was blood on his sleeve.

"Dirty dogs winged me," he muttered as he tore away his sleeve and made a bandage for the flesh wound in his arm. "Hope Curlie kills six of them, that's what."

Curlie had not been idle. Having rested in a dark spot for a moment, and having been told by his wonderful ears that a group of raiders were holding a consultation up the bank to the left, he decided upon a bold stroke. Dropping upon hands and knees, guided by the sound, he crept forward until he could distinguish the

whispered words of the enemy. He caught his breath as he realized that there were at least seven or eight of them.

"Doesn't matter," he told himself stoutly. "In the dark one Yankee is a host. So here goes."

Drawing both automatics and aiming them in the general direction of the whispers, he touched both triggers, then held both fingers firm until the clips were empty. The result was surprising, even to himself. In the forest the sound was like a bunch of giant fire-crackers all set off at once. What the effect was upon the Mexicans, he could not tell. That he must guess, for, almost before the echoes had died away, he was resting behind a giant pine, slipping new clips into his automatics as he pondered the situation.

If later developments, or the lack of them, were to be considered as indications of success, the work of Curlie and Clyde appeared to have turned the tide of battle; the Mexicans disappeared as if by magic. And though a sharp

watch was kept up all night, not a sign of one of them was to be seen.

In the morning, as he revisited the scene of the night attack, Curlie saw that some heavy body had been dragged across the needles at that spot.

"Somebody laid one of them out," he told himself. "Hope it wasn't me. Don't like the idea much. Deserve it well enough, though, I guess. One thing sure, I hope that is the end of that business. This assisting a bunch of rogues in retaining their stolen booty is not to my taste. However, when it's done with a good and lawful reason, and no laws are broken doing it, it's not so bad."

Clyde was slow in admitting that he had been shot in the arm, but once he had shown his wound to Curlie, that young surgeon insisted on drawing through the bullet hole a clean silk handkerchief, which was good enough surgery, though somewhat painful. After that he filled the wound with antiseptic cotton and bound it up well. Since Clyde was a clean-

living boy whose blood ran clear and pure through his veins, it did not seem probable that any great harm could come to him through this flesh wound.

That morning as Curlie rode up the trail for a morning canter, he came at last upon a spot where the trail which wound down the mountain far below him might be seen. To his surprise he saw a caravan of ponies twisting its slow way over that trail.

"There they go," he murmured. "They've given us up as a bad bunch. Good riddance."

As he shaded his eyes, he saw that two ponies were carrying double and that two had empty saddles. "Two of them wounded and being supported by their fellow raiders," he told himself. "Wish it'd be a lesson to them. But of course it won't. Once a fellow has decided that the world owes him a living and that he will get it by robbing and pillaging, it is about as hard for him to change as it is for the desert suddenly to raise a crop of hay without seed or water."

Having delivered this bit of moralizing, he turned his pony about and headed toward camp. He had a good deal of planning and some little work to do this day. That night things would be doing.

"I'll be glad to get into it," he told himself. "To be fighting my own battles and the battles of those who have trusted me by making me a member of the Secret Service of the Air, that's life. That's the Real Thing, spelled with a big 'R' and a big 'T'."

CHAPTER IX

PLOTTING A WAY OUT

The night's adventure had deepened Curlie's contempt for Ambrosio and his crowd. "I have no doubt," he said to Clyde, "that they are dangerous enough in their way, but their way is a treacherous one rather than a brave one. Look at these two mix-ups with the Mexicans. See how they passed the buck. Let us do all the real fighting both times. Oh, old Pete's boys come in telling all kinds of wild tales about hairbreadth escapes and scalp-raising encounters with greasers that outnumbered them three to one, but where's their proof? There were few shots fired besides the ones from the Mexicans and from us. If any others were fired they were shot from behind a big, safe tree and into the air, I'll be bound."

"Looks that way," grinned Clyde, stroking

his wounded arm, "and that makes our little stunt to-night seem a whole lot easier."

"Yes, with the aid of a little thunderstorm I think it is going to be a snap."

"Thunder," said Clyde, in a surprised tone. "How you going to get a thunderstorm to your order?"

"Easy enough," laughed Curlie, dragging a small box from beneath his blankets. "In this little box I have one of my tricks. You've heard of canned music? Well, I have here a canned thunderstorm. It's the very essence of one. In its present form it is considerably reduced. It'd sound about like a rat rolling a walnut across the floor, but once it had been drawn out to its original volume by my little giant of a radiophone outfit, it has all the thunder of the original."

"Stop talking in riddles and tell me what you got," demanded Clyde.

"Well, to express it in childish language, I have in here a miniature phonograph and a record on which has been caught the tones of a

thunderstorm. When it has been amplified about twenty times it has all the force of a terrific storm. Horses won't know the difference between it and the real thing."

"Bravo!" whispered Clyde. "If there is anything in the world that will stampede those colts that are used to dry farms and irrigation it is a well-managed thunderstorm. That'll help a lot. Once they get stampeded, Ambrosio and his gang won't see us for dust."

"You understand the whole plan then?"

"Guess I do. Better go over it again to make sure."

"My idea is this," said Curlie thoughtfully. "Those two Indian guides and the two Mexicans will be up on the Devil's Door Step at ten to-night. Ambrosio will go up there to meet them and to confer about terms. Pete will go up there with him. Anyway, I figure he will. He is a suspicious old robber and is jealous of Ambrosio. He won't take any chance of being double-crossed at the last minute. He'll go, I'm sure of it."

"And that leaves Pete's four lubber boys to guard the corral."

"Probably one or two to watch and the others to go to sleep."

"Couldn't ask for a better thing. To slip up on one of them, bind and gag him, is about as hard as killing a porcupine with a shotgun."

"Well, to-day sometime when there's a chance, you are to cut the wires that bind a set of poles in the corral wall, down at the lower side. You'll bind the ends of the wires up with rawhide thongs so they'll look natural but so it will take only a dozen slashes of a knife to bring the whole section to the ground. When Ambrosio and Pete go up for the big powwow, I'll set my thunderstorm going. That'll get the horses all excited. When you drop the bars, and get behind them with Colie, they'll be away as if shot from a gun. Ambrosio and his best man will be a mile away and may not get on to what's going on until it's all over. Anyway, they'll be too far behind to catch up. We can handle Pete's boys if any of them have the nerve

to ride up to us, which I think they haven't."

"Drive the whole drove of horses plum into Mogordo and put 'em into the village corral, eh? Then let the owners of the stolen ones come in and claim them. Then get the whole country hot-footing it after the thieves. Guess that'll put a crimp in their raiding propensities for a spell."

"Well, I guess!"

"What do you think Ambrosio's plan is?"

"Think he intends to give us the slip. Plan's to let us go to sleep to-night like two innocent little babies. At one a. m. or thereabout, he and his gang open the corral and slide noiselessly down the canyon. Morning finds them out on the broad desert. Before anyone can get up with them they will be away in the rocky hills which are death and destruction to all but Mexicans and Indians."

"Think he'd take our ponies with him — Canary and Colie?"

"Not a doubt about it in my mind. Good ponies. None better anywhere. He likes good

ponies. Besides, if we are afoot we won't make him the least trouble, for the very reason that we won't ever get closer than the Pacific ocean to him."

"Well, there's two plans, Ambrosio's and ours. Time will tell who wins. Justice is on our side; that's a lot. But after all the motto of the desert is 'Trust God and keep your bronco shod.' We'll try to do a little of both."

CHAPTER X

AT THE ZERO HOUR

A strange and interesting scene was set that night as the hour for the great adventure arrived. A mile up the canyon, beneath immense overhanging rocks, two Indians and two Mexicans, having arrived at the appointed trysting place, sat around a fire of pine knots. As the moments passed they did not stir. Each one was busy with his own thoughts, which, had one been able to read their minds, might have been found to be the darkest and direst meditations in the mind of man. Each, wrapped in his blankets and in solemn meditation, sat and stared at the fire.

Making their way through a thick growth of black tamaracks, Ambrosio and Pete moved onward toward the fire beneath the cliff. They, too, were silent. Pete was by nature a silent

man. Ambrosio was made so by the importance of the business of the night. Fifty horses, colts and ponies now occupied the corral. If all went well, by this time next night these would be safely hidden away in a maze of impregnable, rocky fastnesses. Within less than a week of that time, he, Ambrosio, would be riding slowly back from Mexico counting his gains in terms of hundreds of dollars.

In the tent of Ambrosio, three bulky forms lay stretched out beneath the blankets, three of Pete's sons. The other guarded the corral. Ambrosio had said that two should guard the corral while the other two slept. But Ambrosio, according to the thoughts of these youngsters, was altogether too cautious. Had they not vanquished the Mexican bandits who had attempted to raid their corral? Who then would attack them? What need was there for a double guard? Would they not all be astir at midnight? Were not the tents to be struck at that hour? Were not they to drive the horses away down the canyon at that time? Who could tell

what chance they would have to sleep after that? All these questions they had asked themselves after Ambrosio had departed. Then, by cutting cards, they had decided who the unlucky guard should be. This matter disposed of, the three of them had promptly gone to sleep. The fourth was left to go down to the corral, grumbling at his luck as he went. Worse luck it was than he thought, too.

In a clump of trees above the horse corral Curlie Carson was busy at work. Having clamped his radiophone instruments and the miniature phonograph to a board made by hewing down a splintered slab of a fallen pine, he strapped the whole affair to the back of his saddle. In good time he would carry saddle and all down to the corral and fit it to Canary's back. For the present, he allowed it to rest there on the ground. When this work had been done, he sat cross-legged on the ground and, with hands folded across his feet, with all but his ears and his brain asleep, he sat thinking and dreaming.

Strange and somewhat disturbing thoughts they were that came crowding into his mind. He realized quite well that in planning to drive the horses down the canyon he was acting in an unusual manner. He strongly suspected that the best of the horses had been stolen, yet this remained to be proved. If it were not true, and there was no absolute proof that it was, then he and Clyde would be in a tight place, providing Ambrosio could prove that it had been they who had run the horses away. However, Curlie was sure enough that his suspicions regarding Ambrosio would prove well founded to risk it.

"Even so," he told himself, "it's dangerous, mighty dangerous! It's twenty miles down grade to Mogordo. In that twenty miles there are stretches of trail that wind along over precipices four hundred feet high. With fifty horses before us and Ambrosio and his wild Indians and Mexicans behind us, we stand a chance of being killed or taken. And as for mine, 'Give me liberty or give me death.' Ambrosio will never get me alive. I know his kind too well.

The thing he wished to do to Old Baldie when he was escaping told me enough."

With a half hour's start and the horses in a mad stampede, he hoped, however, to reach Mogordo with no greater loss than a wild pony or two gone over the grade.

Whatever misgivings he may have had regarding the guilt of Ambrosio and his gang were quickly dispelled by a whispered message from Clyde. Like some mountain lion prowling in the night, Clyde came creeping out of the dark.

"Say!" he whispered hoarsely, "what do you think? Remember the white pony we saw tethered out before Bill McKee's ranchhouse?"

"The one with the black spot between his eyes?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I remember; finest little pony I ever saw, barring your Colie and my Canary."

"Barring none," Clyde whispered back. "There was never another such pony in all the desert land. He's a full blooded Aztec pony,

descended from how many generations one cannot tell, right back to the time when one Aztec king rode his forbear through the splendid villages where gold glittered like bright pebbles in a stream, in the long ago before the bloodthirsty Spaniards massacred them for their treasure. And I'll tell you," he leaned far forward and whispered in Curlie's ear, "that pony is out there in the corral."

"No!" Curlie straightened up in astonishment. "That — why that couldn't be true."

"I know it couldn't," admitted Clyde, "but the trouble about it is that it is true. I just saw him there. There never was another such pony. I couldn't be mistaken."

"But the ranch is twenty miles away. How could he come up here?"

"Let's see. Let me think." Clyde bent his head in deep thought.

As for Curlie, he was thinking too. He remembered the pony, remembered other things about that ranchhouse as well. He had gone there to find Clyde and had been invited to eat

dinner with the family in the cool, inviting living room of the splendid rambling old structure that housed the rancher's family and all of the men who served as corral men, cowboys and what not on the vast estate.

He had had dinner with the family. Only two members of the family had greatly impressed him — two girls. Curlie was not a lady's man, but he had an eye for beauty all the same. When beauty came before his eyes, he did not look the other way unless modesty bade him do so. One of these girls was unmistakably Spanish. Her dark eyes and olive skin told that. There was fire in those eyes and trouble for one who might cross her will. The other girl was Yankee. With her clear blue eyes, her frankly freckled cheeks and her bare brown arms that showed the bulge of the well-rounded muscles of an out-of-doors girl, she had impressed Curlie strongly from the first and he had hoped that she might come his way many times before he left the desert. There was a curious light in her eyes as she looked at

him too. It was as if those eyes were saying to him, "You have known me before. Don't you recognize me?"

If the eyes had said this her lips had said nothing of the sort. So he had ridden away with Clyde across the desert, promising only to return when their difficult and dangerous task was done.

"Let me see," he whispered to himself. "What was her name? I can't — yes, now I have it — Viola, Viola Martin; that was it."

"Do you know who that pony belonged to?" Clyde broke in on his thoughts.

"Who?"

"Viola Martin."

Curlie started as if Clyde had read his thought. "That's queer," he mused. "I just had her in my mind."

"Don't wonder," chuckled Clyde. "Lots of fellows have had her in their minds — have had sometimes myself. But listen; I know now for dead certain that these horses have been stolen."

"How?"

"That's all the way they would get Snowball — that's the white pony's name. Viola would never voluntarily part with him. He was her father's only legacy to her, the only thing he left her. You see," he whispered, settling down upon the bed of pine needles, "Viola's an orphan. Her father was a prospector down on his luck. He drifted into the ranch half dead, carrying this child of his, Viola, on his shoulder. She was only about eight years old then. Behind him, following like a dog, was a white colt with a black spot in his face, Snowball. Martin died a few days later. Viola was brought up at the ranch and, outside of one year — last year I believe — she has always lived there. Snowball has been her constant companion, the only reminder she has of her poor father, so you see she would not part with him. He was stolen. She's crying her pretty eyes out about him right now. How they got him I don't know; most likely one of the Indians stole him and brought him with him when he came up to make powwow with Ambrosio and

Pete. Anyway, here he is and we must save him for Viola, save him if we don't save a single other horse; save him sooner than my Colie and your Canary. We can get other ponies that will do for us. Viola can never get another inheritance from her father."

Curlie thrilled at the thought. Here was a grand new motive for being brave and daring. He was to be like a knight of old riding into battle to save the happiness of a beautiful lady. What an incentive for bold and fearless action! He pictured himself even now riding Canary up to the ranchhouse with Snowball following on behind. He pictured Viola's surprise and delight. And what would she do and say to him. What did fair ladies do and say to their knights in the brave days of old?

Suddenly he tore himself from this reverie. "When did you say Viola was away from the ranch?" he demanded.

"Last year, I think."

"Where did she go?"

"Went to live with an uncle in some city,

I believe. Traveled with him, I think. Then, if I remember right, something happened to the uncle and she came back here. Just what happened I don't know. I do know that they said Viola was nervous and sort of all shot to pieces, if you know what I mean, when she came back. She's all right now, though."

"You don't know where they were traveling?" Curlie was making a brave attempt not to seem excited.

"Why, no, I never heard. People don't tell everything, especially to mere cow-punchers."

"Don't know what city she went to live in with her uncle?"

"Nope."

Again Curlie lapsed into silence. His mind, however, was busily at work. What it was saying to him was this: "What if Viola is the Whisperer? The Whisperer is down here somewhere; her home is on this desert. She might have been in Chicago last year and sent me those messages to the secret tower room. (Told of in "Curlie Carson Listens In.") She

may have traveled with her uncle in Alaska. Something surely happened to some strange man up there who was accompanied by the Whisperer. (Told of in "On the Yukon Trail.") And what happened might well have shaken the nerves of a girl much older and stronger than Viola."

"But pooh-pooh," he whispered, shrugging his shoulders. "Such a complicated plot belongs to the movies. It couldn't happen in real life."

"Time we were moving," Clyde whispered. "Tune up your instruments and stand by. You'll get the signal for the beginning of the thunderstorm soon. The zero hour is close at hand. And remember, old man, live or die, we go over the top strong. Here's to Viola and Snowball and to all the poor ranchers who need their little treasures of horse flesh. We're going to take them back and see that the rascals who led them away are properly punished."

For a second he gripped Curlie's hand; the next he faded away into the dark.

CHAPTER XI

OVER THE TOP

Down on a sloping bank close to the corral Oscar, the biggest, laziest and flabbiest of Pete's boys, sat dozing in his watch. As Clyde stealthily approached him, his mind repeated some lines he had learned when a boy in school:

"At midnight in his guarded tent
The Turk lay dreaming of the hour
When Greece, her knee in suppliance bent,
Should tremble at his power."

Just what Oscar might be dreaming of, he could not know. He fancied it might be of the time when he might be riding Colie over the desert.

"That time, my boy, will never come," he whispered as, moving from behind a giant pine, he came at last within arm's length of the slumberer.

The next instant, quick as a flash of light he threw both arms about the young giant's neck. Before he had fully awakened, Oscar found himself struggling against bands that held his feet and hands fast, and striving to utter screams through a tightly-bound red handkerchief.

" Sleep in peace, my beautiful young brigand," Clyde murmured as he shot away toward the corral. At the fence he paused to lift his voice in imitation of a pony's neigh. So perfect was this imitation that two of the lonesome, captive ponies in the corral answered it.

That was the signal to Curlie. Almost instantly there came from up the canyon the first deep rumblings of a mountain thunderstorm. As its first echoes rolled down the valley below, wild ponies began to paw the ground and to pace about in a restless manner.

Clyde, having crept through the bars, dragged a saddle after him. Uttering a peculiar call, he brought his pony Colie to his side. Having saddled him and strapped his rifle to the saddle, he led him to the side of the corral.

The peals of thunder grew momentarily louder. Their volume doubled and redoubled, they went rolling down the rocky walls like the beating waves of the sea. The three sleeping boys in the tent slept on. The bickering men and Indians beneath the rocks hastened in their endeavor to reach a settlement. The thunder was all machine made, but this they could not know. From their position beneath the ledge, they could not tell but that a terrific thunderstorm was ready to roll down from the peak of the mountain.

Ambrosio, who still had dreams of capturing the wild horse, Old Baldie, was for another day's stay at camp. Pete, who was beginning to have visions of capture and the hangman's rope, was all for getting away. Each of the two Indians claimed the white pony of Viola as part of his share of the plunder. A Mexican had also set envious eyes upon the beautiful beast. So they argued their great and evil opportunity away. For all the time, as the thunder increased in velocity and power until it seemed it would shake

the very mountains down upon them, the horses in the corral grew more and more restless until they were little more than a rolling mass of horse flesh pitching first this way, then that, like cattle on a ship in a storm.

Just at this juncture there came the flash of a knife and the whole side of a panel of poles fell away. A second flash and the gap was complete. Clyde had cut the rawhide ropes that held that section of the corral up. The horses were now free to go.

They required no urging from Clyde, who had mounted and was ready to ride hard and fast. The snow-white pony led the way. There was a wild snort from many a restless charger, then a mad stampede.

From the lips of Ambrosio, as he rose, startled, from his seat on the rock, there came an oath and a half suppressed, "What was that?"

"Nothing. Thunder, that's all," Pete exclaimed impatiently. "Sit down and let's get this cursed business over with."

"Thought I heard the tramp of horses.

Thought I heard them snort," said Ambrosio.

" Stomping in the corral. 'Fraid of the storm. They can't get out. Boys're watchin'. Can't get away. Sit down, I say!"

He emphasized this last remark with a heavy thrust at Ambrosio's knees which brought him down all in a heap. With a curse and an angry flash of his black eyes the boy lapsed into silence.

The horses, in spite of Pete's assertion, could get away. In fact they had gotten away. With the white pony at their head, with Clyde riding madly at their heels, with the thunder rumbling behind them, they went plunging down the canyon. Still the boys in the tent slept and still the one on the bank rolled over and over in a mad attempt to loosen his bonds.

One pony remained in the corral, Canary. As he heard the rumble of the stampeding horses' feet, Curlie picked up his saddle and with it the radio equipment and, with the thunder all but deafening him, carried them to the corral. Canary bucked and shied from side to side as Curlie tried to mount.

After a moment spent in trying to quiet him, Curlie at last gave it up and, snapping off the batteries, lulled the storm into a sudden and most surprising calm. He next strapped on his saddle, mounted his pony and went racing away after his friend Clyde, who was already a full half mile in the lead.

"Hope we've got enough of a start," he told himself. "Hope they keep on discussing terms. Hope—"

Suddenly his thoughts broke off short. What was that he heard behind him? Was it a genuine peal of thunder or was he hearing in his own mind the echoes of his improvised storm? Turning to look back, he beheld a vivid flash of lightning that illumined the heavens above the mountain peak. There, beyond mistake, was a tremendous and awe-inspiring thundercloud. Blacker than night itself, it appeared to be rapidly blotting out all that lay before it.

"Huh!" grunted Curlie with a shiver, "it's as if I had imitated the doings of the gods and had brought the wrath of them down on me.

It's a genuine storm and a terrible one." He shivered again. Times enough he had heard of the awful storms that swept down from the mountain peak bearing death and destruction in their thundering onrush. In his mind he pictured the walls of water he heard old men of the mountains speak of. He could only hope they were not in for such a storm.

"I am afraid of that," he told himself, "more afraid than I am of Ambrosio and Pete and their murderous Indians. But we have to take what we get in this life. Canary, a little more speed if you can stand it!" He patted his faithful little pony, then went shooting away through the night.

CHAPTER XII

ONE OVER THE PRECIPICE

Whether it was the sudden cessation of Curlie's artificial thunderstorm or the sound of horses' feet rushing down the canyon that at last roused Ambrosio, it would be hard to tell. But he was at last roused. So certain that something had gone wrong at the camp was he that Pete could no longer control him. With an oath he went plunging down the slope from the cliff toward the corral and the others could but follow him.

What he saw as he rounded the corner of the corral brought him up speechless. The corral empty, unguarded, appeared to stare at him like a dead face. The next instant he was bellowing names:

"Oscar! Jack! Mike! Curlie! Clyde! Where are you?"

As he received no response he began cursing. Then catching a sound of rustling pine needles down to the right of him he plunged downward to fall over Oscar's prostrate form. This young rascal, once his bonds had been cut, told as much as he knew of what had happened.

It was just at this moment that Ambrosio caught the first resounding roll of the real thunderstorm. He held his cheek to the breeze for a moment, then, appearing to remember their position, thought for a second. After that, he went plunging up the bank. The others, seeming to read his thoughts, went racing after. There were no longer any horses in the corral. His own pony and those of Pete and his boys were rushing down the canyon with the rest. The only remaining ponies were the four belonging to the two Indians and their companions, the Mexicans. These were standing tied to some small pine trees in a hidden gully. It was evident that "first come, first served" was to be the order of the day. Only four of them could ride after the fleeing horses. Only four might

ride on before the storm. And, perhaps, only four could escape death from the onrushing deluge of the storm. Who could tell? What wonder their labored breath came in deep pants as they labored up the hill.

Ambrosio, Pete and the two Indians won the race. The Mexicans were left to curse in Spanish and to seek the best refuge they might from the storm. As for Oscar, he was so fat and incompetent and so dazed from his recent experiences that he did not participate in the race at all, but stood staring at the corral as if he thought some of the ponies might return and carry him away.

Meanwhile, moment by moment, the storm increased in violence. Curlie Carson, as he raced away after his companion and the stampeding horses, trembled as he heard the terrific claps of thunder that shook the hills. Nothing in all his life had been like it. He had witnessed thunderstorms on the prairies, in Arctic forests, on the Atlantic, but these were but play storms compared to the deafening roar and roll and the

vivid flashes of light that played up and down the canyon. He had once been in a great forge-room at night, had caught the gleam of a thousand forge fires, had heard the ding and din of five hundred triphammers. The storm was like that, only a million times more awe-inspiring and terrible. There came a roll that was like the thunder of an express train going over a rocky embankment; wroom-wroom-wrook — crash-crash-crash! There followed a blinding flash of lightning that seemed to end at his very horse's feet. It illumined the canyon until he could catch the surge of tree-tops a half mile above and read the terror written in the eyes of horses a quarter of a mile below.

At the next flash he turned his head to look anxiously back to the mountain peak where the storm had gathered. To his consternation, he saw not one black pillar of storm, but two. The two seemed to be moving toward one another.

"If — if they meet," he whispered hoarsely, "— then it will be a cloudburst and then God have mercy on us all. A wall of water —"

He did not finish, for a deafening roar that left all others but echoes of a spent storm came crashing in his ears and the next instant a great section of crag just before him went crashing down from above to go thundering into the abyss below.

"The trail!" he breathed. "It may have blocked it. Clyde might have been beneath it. Oh, my God! If ever I get out of this —"

Again his gaze was riveted upon the storm. There could be no mistake. The clouds were closer together, and together they were moving down the mountainside. They would meet somewhere above the canyon.

"And then —" he breathed — "and then!"

The next flash showed him something else — horsemen coming down the trail a half mile above the point where he now was.

"Ambrosio and some of his men, four in all," he breathed. "Let them come; we'll beat them yet."

As for Clyde, leaning far forward in his saddle, keeping pace with the fleeing horses,

watching their every move, he gave no heed to the storm nor to what might be happening to the men behind him. The white pony, still in the lead, raced madly forward. It was for her safety more than any other that he was concerned.

"If I can't take Snowball back to her mistress," he told himself, "what do the others matter?"

Once, as she rounded a sharp bend in the trail where to the left lay an abyss a sheer hundred feet deep, the white pony slipped, fell and rolled over once. Clyde caught his breath. One more roll and she was gone. But with feet in air, the beautiful beast, with all the wisdom of a human being, threw herself back in the direction of the wall. The next instant she was on her feet and speeding on as before.

At another time, as the trail narrowed, a wild pony colt, striving no doubt to catch up with his mother somewhere in the maddened throng ahead, was crowded too close to the cliff's edge. Clinging there for an instant, he at last lost his

footing and with an almost human scream went plunging to his death on the rocks below. Clyde's head whirled, his heart grew sick as he listened for the dull crash that was mercifully lost in a terrific burst of thunder.

CHAPTER XIII

A STRANGE GUIDE

And now the thunder suddenly ceased; the lightning no longer flashed; the wind lulled to a whisper. There came a calm more terrible than the storm. From the trail above Curlie caught the thud of hoofbeats and from below many more. Other than these there was no sound. There was no light. The moon and stars had been suddenly snuffed out. The sky was black as ink. The snap of a twig, the roll of a pebble, startled him. It was as if the end of the world were at hand. He felt the cold perspiration start out upon his brow. What was the meaning of it all?

There was not long to wait, for again the storm broke forth. To this thunder, that which had gone before was but firecrackers set off by some child. To this lightning, the lightning that

had gone before was but the flickering of a candle about to go out. It was blinding, terrifying beyond description. Curlie's mind was paralyzed by it. He rode on, but he no longer thought. He felt the mad rush of wind, caught the wild, burning flash on flash, felt the crash of sound in his ears and rode on, feeling but not thinking at all.

Then the storm broke. Torrents, floods of water. His pony staggered under the sheer weight of it. He felt it pour over his shoulders and down his back as if he were beneath a thundering waterfall. Yet he knew in a vague sort of way that the heart of the storm was not here; that it must be far above on the trail. What must be its volume there? There was not long to wait. Came a strange, a terrifying sound, that was neither falling rain nor rolling thunder. It had the sound of a thousand army trucks rolling down the trail. As Curlie glanced back, a flash of light showed him the faces of the men who pursued him. They appeared white and startled; seemed no longer bent on pursu-

ing him, but in seeking safety. As one of them turned his head to look back he appeared to reel in his saddle, paralyzed by the terror inspired by what he saw. Still, to Curlie, the terrifying thing was out of view.

He had been riding hard all this time. The trail narrowed at this point. Above reared sheer cliffs; below yawned an abyss. The band of horses, wisely led by the white pony, had narrowed down to meet this new emergency. This had slackened their pace. Curlie suddenly found himself abreast of Clyde.

"Wha — what is it?" he screamed.

Cupping his hands, Clyde shouted back, "Cloudburst!"

"Much danger?"

"Danger?" Clyde seemed struck dumb by the question. "Danger!" he sputtered at last. "It's sure destruction and death if it catches us here. Water, man! A mile of water straight up. A river upside-down. A lake on edge and moving like mad!"

He looked at the horses beyond him. "I can

drive them mad with three Apache screams — send 'em over the cliffs. Give us more speed that way. Shall I?"

"The white pony?"

"He'd go with the rest."

Curlie shook his head. "Let's wait."

In spite of their great peril Clyde grinned. "I knew you was that kind," he shouted as a fresh burst of thunder added to the ever-increasing rumble of a thousand army trucks threatened to drown his voice.

Now the four horsemen came nearer. Only two turns in the trail shut them from Curlie and Clyde. If they caught up, what would they do? Would they shoot? Or, like wild beasts on the edge of a deluge, would they cower and seek their own safety rather than revenge?

Back somewhere in the distance, as the lightning flashed, Curlie saw things leaping high in air. This at first puzzled him. What could it be? Too large for birds, the objects leaped high, to fall straight down. At last, with a shiver, he made out one object. It was an uprooted tree

of good dimensions. The next he guessed to be a great fragment of rock. The wall of water was at that point. It was rushing down with such force that it tossed rocks and whole trees high in air. What would horses or humans be in such a flood? For a second he was tempted to tell Clyde to drive the horses over the cliff. The next, he thought of Viola and the white pony and his lips were sealed.

Just what had happened, he now knew quite well. The two storms, meeting, had whirled high in air. In their whirling they had formed a great funnel of moisture. Cooled by the higher air, this funnel had turned to water. The mouth of this funnel, wide as the Mississippi, deep as the Atlantic, had poured its waters into the narrow gorge. Those waters, bearing all before them, were now racing at a mad speed to swallow them up. The cliffs still hemmed them in. Was there relief in sight? This he could not tell.

Just at this moment something appeared which surprised and inspired him. As he strained his

eyes to look ahead, he saw that the white pony was no longer in the lead. But what horse was this that had taken his place? His coat, gleaming like burnished gold in the swift flashes of light, his mane waving in spite of the rain, he was rushing on like some general before his host.

The answer came in an instant. It could be only one horse. How he had come Curlie could not say. This new leader was none other than the wild king of the mountain forests, Old Baldie himself. Somehow, in this revelation there was comfort. It was as if, lost in a mountain wilderness and about to perish, they had come upon a guide who knew every foot of that wilderness and who could lead them to safety. And in this feeling he was not so far wrong.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FACE IN THE FLOOD

Cupping his hands, Curlie shouted above the storm, "Baldie!"

Clyde strained his eyes for a look and then his anxious face relaxed into something like a smile as he echoed back, "Baldie!"

They were still walled in on either side. Indeed, as they descended they were entering more deeply and yet more deeply into a trap. They were descending to the level of the stream. The stream ran between walls of stones. The mountain of water would soon come rushing between those walls and, carrying everything before it, go rushing on to arid valleys far below. Once caught in that whirling flood, no living creature could hope to escape death.

Slowly but surely the four men from behind gained upon them. Just as surely, the flood

gained upon them all. Now the roar of it, that had seemed the thundering of a thousand cannons, became deafening. Trees they had passed but moments before went whirling high in air. Rocks that would have crushed them, had they been in their path, splashed into the flood. Nothing remained where the flood had passed save rugged, barren walls and a swirling mass of water. Still the horses struggled on and the two boys made the best of their way after them.

There came then a little gleam of hope: The wall to the left broke away into a steep, sloping ascent of earth and shale. Yet even this seemed an impregnable barrier. Surely no horse could climb it and as for a man, if he were to attempt the ascent, he would lose footing and be pitched into the flood that by then would be bellowing at his feet.

It was at this dramatic moment that Curlie's confidence in the outlaw horse began to seem warranted. At a certain spot in the trail he was seen to come to an abrupt halt, to face about,

to distend his nostrils into a mighty snort which might well have been a general's command to his men, then to set his feet hard upon the steep incline. The next moment he rose, as if by magic, above the level of the trail. It was hard climbing. His muscles bulged and trembled, but he climbed on. It became evident that there was here something of a narrow trail leading upward. Beyond doubt in some wild chase when raiders were hot upon his trail this noble creature of the wild had climbed over this steep path to safety, leaving his pursuers to wonder into what cloud of thin air he had vanished. Now he was using this same trail to save his own life and the lives of those who followed him. One by one the free horses set their feet upon the incline and began to climb. Each one added something to the stair-step like impressions in the earth, and so made it easier for those who came after. One small pony, older and feebler than the rest, having climbed half a hundred yards, suddenly slipped, to go plunging upon the rocks. The others, like

soldiers charging a rampart, paid no attention to this one but climbed straight on.

As for Curlie and Clyde, they looked on in admiration and wonder not unmixed with anxiety. Would they all make it in time? Would there remain time for them and for their ponies to follow? To attempt to break in ahead of any of these free horses they knew would be madness. They could do nothing but wait.

So a moment passed. The deafening thunder of the flood grew a hundred times more deafening. It was as if all the munition depots in all of a vast battle-front had been hit and set off at once. It was as if all the thunderstorms of all the past had been recalled to tear away at the cliffs of that canyon. Yet, above it all, they heard, as in a dream, the approaching hoofbeats of horses and knew that Ambrosio, Pete and the Indians were all but upon them.

"Now!" breathed Clyde, when the suspense had grown unbearable. "Now!"

The last free horse had taken the ascending trail. Throwing Colie's reins over his back,

Clyde spoke but one word to him. He was away up the hill, tearing up the earth as he went. Curlie followed Clyde's example. Then with the damp breath of the flood fanning their cheeks, they began to climb. The flood was high, a mountain. Had they waited too long?

With panting breaths and sobbing chests, they climbed for their lives. Now they had placed ten yards between them and the trail level — now thirty — now forty.

Curlie hazarded a look back. What he saw chilled and horrified him. Behind him came Ambrosio, Pete and the two Indians. But their horses? They had been left in the trail, left to the destruction of the flood. Undirected, these ponies, unaccustomed to the mountain, and unled by any of their kind, would not attempt the ascent. They must perish. A hot rush of anger caused Curlie to hesitate. He was tempted to turn back and to pitch the faithless riders who would desert their faithful steeds in a moment like this back into the path of the flood. Better judgment came to his

rescue and he again began to climb.

He had reached what promised to be a safe level when he again looked back. The canyon was already filled with black, swirling water. This water was rapidly rising. The ponies of the renegades had disappeared. The Indians had outclimbed the flabby-muscled Pete. He was now struggling over a slippery bit of a shelf thickly strewn with shale. Suddenly there came a cry. He had slipped, was plunging downward. Now he caught at a scrub pine growing on a rock, but the pine tore away. Again he plunged toward the swirling flood. In the white light of a flash, Curlie caught a glimpse of his face. Such a look of fear was on it as he hoped never again to see. Still he glided toward destruction. Then, as if reaching up an arm for him, the waters seized him and sent him whirling away.

Once in the flood Curlie caught sight of his face. It was ghastly white. Then, in the midst of tangled tree trunks and whirling eddies of foam, he disappeared forever.

"He paid the price of the life he has lived," was Curlie's mental comment. "Nature and society have said that a man shall work if he is to live, and that he shall exercise if he is to be fit to fight life's battle. He chose to live off the labors of others. He refused to keep himself fit by honest labor. Now he is gone. Had his muscles been firm, had he had the courage of an honest man, he would not have lost his grip at the critical moment. Yet it is a hard thing to see. I would have saved him had it been within my power to do so.

"Wouldn't wonder," he mused a moment later, "if he was the man who insisted on leaving the ponies to be food for the flood. It was like him."

Turning his face upward, he again began to climb and, fifteen minutes later, found himself galloping after Clyde and the free horses, who were now racing away down the gradual slope on the other side toward the desert that gleamed yellow in the distance.

CHAPTER XV

DARK SHADOWS OF PERIL

Curlie Carson sat limp in his saddle as he rode away after his companion. His arms hanging down at his side, his knees knocking against the saddle as Canary galloped on, seemed to say that he had fainted or was asleep. He was neither of these, but was in a sort of stupor, the kind of stupor that comes over one after he has passed through an experience that has worked on his every emotion and drawn his nerves tight as drum-strings, to leave them at last loose as bell-ropes.

He was still thinking, but in a listless sort of way. The experience he had passed through, he was telling himself, was the most thrilling, the most terrible, the most terrific that could ever come to him. In this he was partly right and partly wrong. It had been the most ter-

rific thing that any person is likely to witness, but as for danger and thrills, Curlie was destined to pass through an experience, and that within a few short hours, which would cause the blood to mount to his cheek and send such thrills racing up his spine as had never coursed there before. His companion in this last desperate encounter on the desert was to be the most interesting and mysterious character that it had ever been his privilege to meet.

He felt something of the shadow of this great coming adventure pass over him like a cloud as he straightened up in his saddle and urged his pony on that he might overtake Clyde. There were plenty of things to fear. Pete was dead, but Ambrosio, the treacherous brains of the outlaw gang, was at liberty. So, too, were the Mexicans and Indians and Pete's four boys, providing none of these had been caught by the flood. All of these held a deep grudge against him and Clyde. That they would not rest in peace until that grudge was satisfied or they had met definite defeat, he knew quite

well. Pete's boys, urged on by Ambrosio, would attempt to avenge the death of their father. That in their narrow brains Pete's death would be charged to him, Curlie knew quite well, and Ambrosio and his Indians would blame him for the loss of their wealth of stolen horses. So the matter stood.

As for the horses, he had saved them, for the time being at least, from Ambrosio and his gang. This much had been done toward the winning of his golden spurs and that greater prize, the privilege of looking for the first time upon the face of the Whisperer. But those horses at the present time were racing madly toward the desert. On this side of the ridge there had been no cloudburst. The earth was hot and dusty. These horses, led as they were by the fiery Baldie, would race away mile on mile. They might even cross the line into Mexico. There they might fall an easy prey to Mexican raiders on their own soil. There Curlie and Clyde would be helpless.

All these things Curlie thought through as

he raced along after Clyde. At last, having caught up with him, he called on him to pause for a brief consultation.

"Can't catch up with them until they are fagged," was Clyde's terse spoken judgment. "Couldn't turn 'em if we did catch up. This is a mob of horses gone wild. Best thing we can do is to separate. You go back to that wireless station of yours out there in the desert and I'll stay with them and keep track of them, at least."

"Why go back to the station?" Curlie asked in a puzzled tone.

"Broadcast a message stating just how things stand and calling for aid in bringing this bunch of horses back to Mogordo. You'll be heard by some who own horses up there on the mountain plateau. They'll all imagine their horses have been stolen and will rush to our aid. There'll be a lot of others who will come from a purely brotherly feeling for others in trouble. That way, once we get the horses turned, I'll have plenty of help to drive them back and to

defend them against Ambrosio and his men, if they should get some new ponies and come after me."

"Think he could?" asked Curlie.

"Who could what?"

"Ambrosio get new mounts for his men."

"Surest thing in the world. He's been living somewhere, hain't he? So's Pete and his boys. There are other ponies and probably other gangsters where they came from. Within twenty-four hours or less Ambrosio will be hot on our trail. Say!" he exclaimed suddenly, "I don't know's it's safe for you to go out there to your desert station alone. They may catch your message and come out to silence your station forever."

"Let 'em come," said Curlie grimly, patting his rifle. "That's what I'm on the desert for. That's how I win my golden spurs. Get on off after the horses. They're behind a ridge already. I'll get the message off, never fear."

With that he wheeled his pony about and went racing away.

"Never saw a white-collar feller like that," muttered Clyde as he turned his pony to the broad trail of the horses. "Didn't know they could be that good."

CHAPTER XVI

LOST IN A SANDSTORM

Curlie rode across the desert with a spirit of high glee coursing through his whole being. He had overcome the reaction from his recent experiences. He was now quite himself again and ready for any adventure. Having looked at his watch he was amazed to see that it was but an hour past midnight. He caught his breath in surprise. From the time he had set the artificial thunderstorm going to the present moment had been less than four hours. It seemed to him now as he looked back upon it that the experiences of a year had been crowded into that brief space of time.

The desert held an indefinable charm for him. He felt it now as never before. He rode with feet high upon his pony's shoulders. He had been obliged to throw away his "chaps"

to save himself from the flood. Now he was riding in the uncertain moonlight through a vast forest of cacti and sage. The cacti were armed with thorns as sharp as hatpins and quite poisonous. The sage gave forth a strange, pungent odor to the damp air of night. The moon spread deep purple shadows everywhere. Save for the soft pat-pat of his pony's feet, the occasional thud-thud of a frightened jack-rabbit or the distant challenge of a coyote, the night was still.

This stillness, contrasting so strangely with the roar of thunder and the terrific din of the flood that had so recently deafened him, seemed almost ghostly. As he drew near to his cabin, standing dark and alone among the sand dunes, it seemed to him that he could almost see ghostly figures flitting about it from corner to corner.

"Ghosts of adventures yet to come," he whispered to himself as he dropped the reins over Canary's head and put his hand to the latch.

If the cabin had seemed ghostly from with-

out, it seemed a hundred times more so from within. Even after he had struck a light and had searched every nook and corner for any intruder who might have entered during his absence, the impression still persisted that there were other beings within the cabin.

"That's what comes from the invention of the radio," he whispered to himself. "A radio bug is always imagining that he is not alone when in reality he is. There are ghosts of men about him, ghosts of those who have spoken on the radio and will speak no more. Their voices are dead but their echo is still in the air, or so it seems to him. In time there may come a radio so fine that it will enable those who have spoken to us in life on earth and have passed on to another world to talk to us once more. Then who is to control the air? You can set your radio-compass and spot a living man who is using the radio in an illegal way, but if ghosts get to breaking in, why, how are you ever going to locate them? If you do locate them, how are you ever to catch and

punish them, since they cannot be seen at all?"

All this bit of whimsical meditation was passing in his mind as he went through the motions of tuning up his instruments, testing them here and there and at last seating himself on his stool by the sending-table. A moment later he was speaking in a slow, well-modulated tone, telling in a few well-chosen words of the events of the night. He did not go into detail but did say that a drove of horses had been stolen from the larger drove on Big Saddle Mountain; that they had escaped the flood and were now racing away over the desert toward Mexico. He did call upon all honest cowboys and ranchers to turn out and assist in returning the horses to their owners and in hunting down and capturing the rustlers. He gave the general location of the horses when last seen by him and the direction they had taken. After that he settled back in his place, with his back against the wall to wait and listen in.

He had little hopes of being answered. "Be lucky if I'm heard at this time of night," he

told himself, "especially by anyone who will lift a hand to help us. The stations that are open at this time of night are gambling dens. They are more likely to be on Ambrosio's side than ours. If they get my message, they'll know well enough where it comes from. If they know where to look for Ambrosio they'll get word to him and he'll come hot-footing it over here to—"

Pausing in his meditation he sat with wrinkled brow for a full minute. After that he dropped from his seat, took a rifle down from the wall, slipped a clip into it, placed two other clips close beside it on a low table, drew an automatic from its holster, examined its charge, placed it beside the rifle, then with a sigh of relief settled back into his place.

"Let him come," he muttered. "He'll find me prepared."

As for Clyde, he was making the best speed he could after the fright-maddened horses. He could not make his best speed, for where he rode there were plenty of thorny cacti. Like

Curlie he had been obliged to leave his chaps behind. His pony, too, must be protected from those murderous thorns. What the punishment to the racing horses must be, he could only guess.

"Take a week to get them back in form," he told himself as, dodging a specially vicious-looking tree of cactus he urged his pony forward.

The air was still, but now he caught a breath of wind. Turning to glance back, he was shocked at what he saw behind him. The air was black. One by one the stars were disappearing. It was as if a great curtain was being drawn up from earth to highest heavens.

"The storm," he breathed. No cloudburst now; it had transformed itself into a new species of airy demon — a sandstorm. "What is to become of the horses and of Colie and me now?" he asked himself as he settled back in the saddle.

He drew his horse up to a full halt and sat there staring while a minute passed; then with

a muttered, "Have to try to keep in touch with them some way," he hurried on after the fast disappearing horses.

Then the storm broke upon him, a wild, whirling mass of yellow murk. It swallowed him up and lost him the horses in a second of time. Turning every dune into a volcano that smoked sand, it went whirling and howling onward. The air was filled with sand, fine, sifting sand that set his teeth gritting, that poured down his neck and stole into every opening in his garments. Beating against the flanks of his pony, it filled his mane and tail so full of sand that they turned brown and gray where but a moment before they had been jet black.

Fortunately, they were going with the storm. To face it would be ten times worse. Even as it was, his eyes smarted with the cut of the sand.

Faithfully Colie plodded on. Holding him to a course in the general direction of the free horses' trail, he fought doggedly forward. With head bent low, with eyes half closed, he gave

himself over to the inevitableness of the storm. There was no way to escape. The nearest shelter was miles away. He did not know the direction to that shelter. It was true that he might protect himself to some extent by dismounting and covering himself with the blanket strapped to the back of his saddle, but this he did not care to do. He had hopes of coming up with the horses and of remaining with them until the storm had passed. In this he was not to be disappointed, for as he strained his eyes for a look, he caught sight of a blurry, dark mass straight ahead. This was the drove. As horses always do in a storm, they had halted their mad race and, having bunched together as closely as possible, stood with backs to the wind, weathering the storm as best they could.

"Well, Colie, old boy, here we are," Clyde breathed as they came up with them.

Some of the nearest ponies sidled away as he approached, but others — those used to men — did not move, so at last the solid mass of them still confronted him.

"Now for a little comfort," he sighed as he dismounted stiffly to shake a little cataract of sand from his shoulders.

Dragging his heavy blanket from the saddle, he drew it over his head like a small tent. Then, with Colie's reins drawn over his wrist, he sat down upon the sand.

The song of the wind was in his ears, the howl of it and the everlasting pelting of sand against his improvised shelter. From time to time he lifted a corner here or there to shake away loads of sand that had settled there.

He was very weary and sleepy as well. The night had been long. The strenuous exertion, the unusual excitement, had tired him more than he knew. His hands were wrapped about his knees. His head drooped more and more until at last he fell into a troubled sleep.

How long he slept he did not know. When at last he awoke, it was with the consciousness of a heavy weight on his back that was crushing the life out of him and of sounds of strange movements that appeared to be all about him.

The weight he found to be sand that had heaped up in a mound from behind and had all but buried him alive. This was soon shaken off. The wind was still howling; the storm was at the height of its fury. But what was this movement about him?

Hastily throwing off his blanket, he stood up. To his astonishment, he found himself completely surrounded by horses. In their restless shiftings the drove had moved about until he was in the very center. What surprised him still more was that, standing side by side with Colie, and helping to form a sort of barrier of protection for him as he slept, was Snowball, the white pony of Viola Martin.

"Sort of feel that you and me and Colie are kin, don't you?" he whispered with a catch in his throat. "Well, I can't say you're far wrong, and by all that's good we'll all get out of this together, if getting out of it for any of us is at all possible."

The next instant he put his hand to his ear and listened. Had he caught the sound of a

human voice above the storm? He thought so. Yes, there it was again, a strange, wild shout of joy or triumph, he could not tell which.

"That's not Curlie, nor it ain't any white man," he breathed. "It's Indian or Mexican. Now what sort of rotten luck have we run into? Seems like this storm was bad enough without any scrap on top of it. Say," he said to Colie suddenly, "we came a long way — are we in old U. S. A. or in Mexico?

"Can't tell?" he asked grimly. "Well, neither can I, but it makes a lot of difference to you and me which it is."

At that he rose, looked to the clip in his rifle, brushed the sand from his saddle as well as he could, then, having mounted, lay flat down in his saddle to shade his eyes as best he might and to peer away through the gray murk of sand.

CHAPTER XVII

IS THIS THE WHISPERER?

For an hour Curlie Carson in his radio cabin busied himself at alternately sending messages regarding the stolen horses and listening in for any message which might be sent by the renegade Ambrosio or that might have been dispatched in answer to his call. He had little hopes of being heard by any legitimate station at that time of night. Just when he was thinking of giving it all up and turning in for ten winks, a rude gust of wind struck his cabin and with it there came the rattle of sand against the tarpaper wall.

"Hi!" he exclaimed starting up, "A sandstorm! That makes it worse for Clyde. A whole lot worse. Got to get through somehow."

Just then a call came to his waiting ears, a

whisper and a very faint one. Yet his sensitive ears caught it.

"Hello — hello, Curlie. We got your message. You were brave to send it. They're after you. You will be in great danger if you stay many more hours at the station. You had better — "

Strain his ears as he might and did, he could not catch the words that followed. "Static," he mumbled. "Always bad in a storm."

Again he strained his ears as the message came more clearly. "Clyde will be all right. Men are going to help him to round up the horses. You had better — "

Curlie caught a stifled scream, the scream of a girl, over the radiophone. It was the first time he had heard the mystery girl's voice raised above a whisper. "Wouldn't have heard it then," he told himself, "if something serious hadn't happened."

For a few minutes he sat thinking. His head was in a whirl. He was in great danger — the Whisperer had told him that — yet it

was not of himself he was thinking, but of her. That she, too, was in grave danger, he had guessed by the involuntary scream. How could he best aid her? That was the question uppermost in his mind. How could he help her at all when he did not as much as know where she was?

He started at this question and stared down at some figures on a pad before him. Then he stared at his radio-compass.

"Huh!" he exclaimed, "the human mind is a strange and wonderful thing. Looks as if I had measured her distance with the compass and marked her location without knowing I was doing it at all — done it so many times before that my unconscious mind worked it out all by itself.

"And by the everlasting sands!" he whispered, rising and pacing the floor, "she was nearer this cabin when she sent that message than ever she was before. Not three miles away, right out on the desert! I wonder if she is coming this way? Wonder if I should

go out to meet and escort her in? Some of those dirty rascals may have come across her on the trail!"

Fairly overcome with excitement, he still forced his mind to quiet counsel. He listened to the howl of the wind, to the rattle of sand on the window panes. He walked to the window and tried to peer outside.

"Black as a London fog," he muttered. "Couldn't see twenty yards. Chances are ten to one I'd miss her if I went out. Then, if she succeeded in reaching this cabin, she'd find herself alone, unprotected. No, I'll not go; I stay."

Seating himself resolutely upon his stool, he again placed the headpiece over his ears. "Might get something more from her," he murmured.

A minute passed, two, three, four, and yet no sound came to his listening ears; only the rude burst of the storm that now and again shook his cabin told him that the tempest was gaining in violence.

Then, of a sudden, there burst upon his ears the rude growl of a man's voice.

"Boys're out after him, ten of 'em. They'll get him dead to right." This short message was followed by a laugh that was more like the growl of a lion than anything human.

"No friend of mine," murmured Curlie, "has a laugh like that. So they're after him? Who's him? Wonder if I am? Ten of them in a sandstorm. That sounds bad if they locate the cabin. But maybe they won't."

He thought of broadcasting a call for aid, but decided that he did not as yet have sufficient proof that he was in real danger. He thought again of the girl and hoped with all his soul that if she had started for the cabin she might reach it in safety.

In the midst of these thoughts he was brought up standing. Puncturing the zip of the storm, there had come the rat-tat-tat of an automatic rifle.

"Shooting!" he exclaimed. "That sounds like business."

He was hesitating between grasping his rifle and sending a call for help, when some object came crashing against his door, sprang the latch and sent it whirling in.

A wild, eddying blast of sand driving in through the open door half blinded him. He saw but indistinctly the person who fell across the threshold. Thinking only of the wildly whirling storm, he sprang forward and closed the door. Then he looked down at the impromptu visitor. One might have said the person was a slender cowboy. Dress would have told that. Chaps, a brown affair that might have been a shirt, a broad sombrero held on by a strap under the chin, this was the picture that lay at his feet. As for the face, it was so incrusted with sand dust as to bear the appearance of a masked face. One thing alone told Curlie that this was no boy: A heavy mass of dark brown hair, torn at by the wind, had been thrown into great disorder. This hair could not belong to a boy.

"The Whisperer!" he breathed to himself.

All this time the girl lay there panting. Now she raised herself and pointing at the door murmured brokenly:

"Bolt — bolt it."

Curlie complied with her request.

After that she sat staring at him in a dazed sort of way. It was then that Curlie noticed that she clutched in one hand a rifle and in the other a bridle.

"Did he get away from you?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Your horse."

"I turned him loose. They'll never get him; he's too swift — lose himself in the storm in a minute. They — they —" her voice rose almost to a shriek — "they shot at me. The beasts!"

Then, seeming to sense danger, she leaped to her feet and, still gripping the rifle, leaped toward the window.

Reading her intention, Curlie pushed her aside to grip his own rifle. At that very instant there came the crash of a rifle and a bullet spat against the side of the cabin.

"You lie down there on the floor," he commanded sternly. "The sand is piled so high against the sides that it's like a basement down there. Safe for you. Bullets can't get at you."

"But I can shoot — shoot straight. I — I want to shoot," insisted the girl.

"You may have to. Your turn may come soon enough. It's my turn now. Do as I say." He pushed her gently to the floor.

The next instant he was at the window. A second rifle cracked; a second bullet tore at the cabin wall. As he peered into the brown murk he caught sight of a gray streak flying through it, then another and another.

"Men on horses," he murmured. "They're circling the cabin and firing as they circle. Old-time Indian stuff. Might be effective enough at that. Time will tell. Can't see 'em well enough for a sure shot — mere streaks in a fog of sand — but I'll let 'em know I'm here. Wing 'em too, if I can."

After pressing the lever of his automatic rifle and knocking out a corner of glass from a

windowpane, he stood at attention with his finger on the trigger.

"Won't — won't they see you at the window?" the girl asked.

"Too much sand fog for that," he muttered. "Anyway, if they can, let 'em."

In spite of the imperative demand for action, Curlie was thinking quite as much of the girl at his feet as of the gray streaks which had passed his window and might pass it again in a moment. He had not the least doubt that she was the mysterious Whisperer whom he had so long known in the air and whom he had so much desired to see. He had not seen her yet. One glimpse of her sand-masked face he had snatched, then the lights had flashed out. He had snapped them off himself. In such a situation, lights were dangerous. Now, though the first faint streaks of dawn were beginning to show through the sand fog, the cabin was quite dark. He could distinguish the girl's form as she crouched on the floor, but could tell nothing of her features.

As he thought of the position they were in; of the peril that surrounded them, as ten mounted horsemen, armed with rifles, circled their cabin, bent on their destruction, as he realized that he might have found the Whisperer only to lose her at once in death, that he might not really see her at all, his head whirled, his hand trembled at the rifle's grip.

Quick to catch the least motion, the girl read his thoughts from that tremble. She began to talk. Her tone was steady and slow, the most reassuring in the world. Curlie could easily have fancied that she was at an afternoon tea party telling some interesting experience. Her voice was low and deep. He liked that voice though he could not see the lips that spoke.

"You see," she said, "I caught your message in the ranchhouse but our aerial wasn't very good, not good enough to send by, so I saddled up my pony and mounted my portable set on the back of the saddle. I rode out into the desert and sent up a kite with a perpendicular aerial on it. When I had done that, I

could hear plainly everything that came through the air and I could send as well. I rode toward your cabin because I thought I might catch your message better if I were closer up. Then I caught something that told me you were in danger. Of course I wanted to tell you about it. I started to speak to you when that dreadful sandstorm began. It set my kite tossing so I think it must have tangled my aerial."

"That's why I couldn't hear all that you said. That—"

Suddenly Curlie's figure grew tense. His eye ran along the barrel of his rifle, his finger tightened on the trigger, then his rifle cracked out its leaden message.

"Get him?" The girl asked the question as quietly as if he had been shooting squirrels.

"Can't tell. Hard to see them—gray streaks, that's all." He dropped to the floor beside her. He felt her shoulder against his, her breath on his cheek.

Three rifle bullets tore the wall above them. The next instant he was on his feet again with

the simple comment, "Thought they were going to shoot."

"Let's see," laughed the girl, "where were we?"

"Your kite was caught in the sandstorm."

"Yes. Then it sort of straightened out and I sent a little more of my message to you. After that the kite took a nose-dive for the sand and at almost the same instant a rider loomed up out of the storm. I knew he wasn't any friend of ours by the way he rode. Another came in sight and when I started to run away, they shot at me three times."

"The cowards!" exclaimed Curlie. "To shoot at a girl."

"Yes, and do you know, I thought I recognized one of them. I think it was Ambrosio."

"I haven't a doubt of it. I saw him try to shoot a horse once, a perfectly splendid horse, just because he had escaped from his trap."

"Oh, no! Surely he couldn't!" All the girl's passionate love for horses was expressed in this exclamation.

"He did though. And for those things, if he's circling this cabin with the rest, and if I can tell him from the rest, I'll wing him if I can."

"If you don't, I will!" There was fierce hate in the girl's tone. "You can tell him, too. He doesn't ride like the others. He stands in the stirrups and leans far forward. Sits straight as a ramrod."

"We'll get him. You'll see."

CHAPTER XVIII

CLYDE'S FAREWELL TO COLIE

As Clyde mounted his pony in the midst of the drove of horses, huddled together to protect themselves against the sandstorm, he glanced from right to left and from left to right in the hopes of catching sight of the man who had let forth the exultant shout. Through the sand fog he could see no moving object.

His mind at once attacked the task of deciding who these newcomers might be. That it was not Ambrosio and his gang of raiders he knew well enough. They had been without horses the last time he saw them. For them to find new mounts and then to follow the trail of the horses over the desert in the midst of the sandstorm that obliterated all trails was impossible. That it might be the band of raiders he had helped to drive from Ambrosio's corral,

two days before, he knew well enough. He knew what would happen if they discovered him here and recognized in him the person who had defeated their earlier attempts to capture this very drove.

"Don't matter whether they recognize me or not," he told himself. "If they find me with the drove, they'll do me in fast enough on general principles. Might not be them, though. Might be some other band of Indians or Mexicans, or for that matter, it might be some honest drovers, though I doubt it. Honest men are seldom out in a storm like this at this hour of the night, and they don't let out any such blood-curdling yell when they sight a drove of runaway horses either."

"Guess I'm in for it," he muttered. "There they come out of the fog. Two Indians and one Mexican. Others behind, too, I'll be bound."

He flattened himself closer to the back of his pony, gripped his rifle and waited. The nose of the white pony was against his chest. "All

right, old girl," he whispered, "I'll get you out of this if I can. Do it for Viola's sake and for your own sake. Trust me."

The raiders, and raiders they were, Clyde had not the least doubt of it now, came forward cautiously. No doubt they feared an ambush. That this drove of fine horses should be out here alone and unguarded on the desert, did not seem possible to them. Their rifles were cocked and in position for firing. Their eyes were shaded by hats drawn low. Still they moved slowly forward. It was evident they had not seen the boy in that unusual position, the very center of the drove. They began circling the drove. There was a whispered conversation going on between them. Whatever might have inspired that single shout, they were silent enough now.

Just as they were passing almost from sight around the far corner of the drove and Clyde was thinking of bettering his chances of escape by working his way to the outer ring, there came a sharp exclamation, followed instantly by

a shot. A bullet sang over his head. Instead of answering the shot, he dropped behind his pony and, still clinging to the saddle, began urging his mount through the densely packed drove to the right. He must have freedom from this jam if he was to save any part of the drove or even his own life.

More bullets sang over his head. A wild pony at his left let forth an almost human scream, then crumpled in his tracks. The other horses began to rear and snort. Clyde's difficulty in making his way out was doubled by the restless shove of the frightened horses. Just when he was despairing of ever making it, a gap appeared before him. The horses had broken rank. With one wild leap he was in the saddle and the next moment was galloping free from the pack.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he again sank low on his pony's back. His relief, however, was short-lived, for there came a crack off to the right and Colie stumbled and plunged headforemost in the sand.

"Got you! Death to 'em!" he muttered. As he dropped behind his dying horse he sent such a volley of hot shots after the raiders as drove them scattering into the sand fog.

"That's that!" he muttered, "but what's next?"

As if in answer, he felt a damp nose upon his neck. Looking up quickly, he saw the white pony standing over him; Viola's own.

"What! You here?" There was a choke in his throat. "I promised to see you out of this and I'm bound if it won't be you who'll see me out of it."

With a nimble spring he leaped upon the pony's back. Then, without saddle or bridle but with rifle still in hand, he sent the pony racing away into the fog.

Just when he thought he was free to go his way, a huge animal reared up out of the storm, a horse, ridden by a vicious-looking Mexican. The man took deliberate aim at the white pony's head. But before his trigger was touched, his hands flew up and he went plunging down.

"Take that!" exclaimed Clyde. "You've doubtless earned it many times over and that just saved the old U. S. A. the price of a trial and fifty feet of hemp rope. Now, Snowball, show us what you can do."

As if understanding his words, the noble animal sprang forward at a pace that brought them, in the space of a quarter of an hour, far from all danger.

"Well," whispered Clyde as they slowed down to a walk and he straightened up in his saddle, "we got away with our lives. Reckon we're lucky at that. But we left the horses to the raiders. Guess they'll drive them over into Mexico and we'll see them no more. I hate that for the sake of the poor dry-farmers and for Curlie's sake. He worked hard to save them and so did I. But, Snowball, I'm sure they'll all be glad you got out of it without a scratch on your white coat. And Colie," he shook his head sadly, "Colie, my own brave Colie, you are gone forever. I'll never go racing over the desert with you again."

In this speech he was partly right and partly wrong. In prophesying what would become of that drove of horses he overlooked one fact and that was that Old Baldie was still its leader. Old Baldie was no ordinary horse. No white man had ever succeeded in capturing and subduing him. It remained to be seen whether or not Mexicans could. As for Clyde, he did not think of this fact at all as he studied out his course home by the compass, then set himself to ride into the teeth of the storm.

At this very moment, as Clyde caught the first faint glimmer of dawn, Curlie Carson was aiming his rifle at a gray streak that was skirting the horizon.

"Missed again," he muttered as he studied the sights on his rifle and placed his finger again on the trigger, ready for another shot.

CHAPTER XIX

MYSTERY, THRILLS, ADVENTURE

Curlie Carson had been in some tight places in his short life. He had known many a thrill and adventure. Mystery had followed him like a cloud. That had been a thrilling adventure which had carried him far into the Atlantic with a pleasure yacht, at last to set him afloat on a raft during a terrific storm. Ah, yes, that had been an adventure to be long remembered. Yet he had by his own ingenuity and cunning escaped.

The night in which he followed the mystery man of many jewels out upon the Arctic ice had given him a tense moment. There had been thrills and mystery in the whole of his wild chase over the Yukon Trail. Yet he had returned in safety.

Yes, Curlie had seen adventure, as you know well enough if you have read those other stories, "Curlie Carson Listens In" and "On the Yukon Trail."

Yet there had never been a time in his life when so much of mystery, thrill and adventure had been packed into a single hour as that one which he was now passing through. Close to him, so close that her shoulder now and then, as he stooped to dodge an expected bullet, touched his, was the mystery girl, the Whisperer who for months and months had haunted the very air over his head. He had not seen her face, did not yet know who she was nor what she was like, except that she was very brave. This he had guessed long ago. He might never know more. Any moment might be his last. Every now and again bullets rained against the cabin like hail. He had missed them all thus far. How much longer could it last?

Here, then, was mystery, thrill and adventure, with the Whisperer at his feet, ten enemies riding about the cabin and shooting it up as

they rode. No moment in his life had been more thrilling.

As he thought of it in a vague sort of way, between times of firing at the gray phantoms, he imagined that he was back a hundred or two hundred years in the history of his country. The girl at his feet was his mate. Together they had moved far out into the unbroken plains to make themselves a home. Then, when their cabin was built and their patch of land plowed and sown, the savage, scalping Indians had come. Now, in the early fog of the morning, they were circling his cabin, riddling it with bullets. In time perhaps they would lay him low. They would burn his cabin, trample down his grain and carry his mate away captive.

A bullet that burned his cheek wakened him from this reverie. This was no dream — it was reality. The men who circled the cabin were not Indians, at least not all of them. They were worse — white men and Mexicans gone wild. Angered because he had lost his ill-gotten gain of horses, Ambrosio had found new mounts

and new companions to join him in a raid on the cabin. His time in the United States, for the present at least, was over. He must flee to Mexico for safety. But before he went, that he might not be traced into Mexico by the invisible finger of the radio, that he might feel it safer to return on raiding expeditions to the States, that his kind might feel safer in their robber trades, he had resolved to wreck and burn this new station of the Secret Service of the Air, in the hopes that the enterprise might be given up as a failure. Having resolved upon this, he would be only too glad to kill the young operator who had made this station a reality and had thus provided greater protection for honest men and their property. Here was peril of the worst kind and Curlie, as he slipped a fresh clip in his rifle, knew it right well.

Suddenly he became conscious of some move on the part of the girl. What was she doing? Ah, yes, now he knew. She had put up a hand and had dragged his sending telephone to the floor beside her. She had twisted a button here,

thrown on a switch there. And now she was talking in low, distinct tones. She was not talking to herself, nor to Curlie, but to anyone in the world who might chance to listen.

"Good girl!" he breathed. "That's a fine idea."

She had set the sending instruments in order and was broadcasting a call for help. Slowly, deliberately, she told of their position and of their peril. She was asking that any honest men within sound of her voice come to their rescue. Suddenly, in the midst of this message, there was a sizzling snap. Curlie knew that a bullet crashing through the side of the cabin had cut a battery connection and had killed the radiophone.

"Oh!" he groaned.

The next moment his body grew tense, as he aimed his rifle and fired. He had aimed far forward of one of the gray streaks this time, and to his great joy saw the horse go crashing to the ground bearing his rider with him.

"That's one of them," he breathed.

Again he strained his eyes for a sight of them. They did not seem to be passing that way. Perhaps they had discovered that he was shooting from the window on that side. He shifted his position and again they flitted by, firing as they went. Having stooped to dodge a shower of bullets, he again rose and took steady aim at a fleeing figure.

"Doing fine," he exulted. "Another went down. That's eight. If they keep on missing I'll have them terribly discouraged yet."

All this time he was conscious of a movement by the girl. She had found a knife in his kit, had stripped the broken wire, had spliced it and was again speaking in low, distinct tones to the world outside.

Now she talked and now paused to listen.

"I can't get an answer," she all but sobbed. "Oh! why don't they answer? I know they will come. But it may be too late."

"Yes," whispered Curlie huskily, "it may be too late. Dawn is breaking. The sandstorm is abating. Their cover is fast disappearing.

They are growing anxious, crowding in. They may get us any moment. If they storm the cabin we are lost. They are eight to our two."

"But they are cowards."

"Desperate cowards sometimes seem brave. They know that if we are not destroyed, they are lost. They'll get us if it is humanly possible."

Again he rose cautiously to peer out of the window. Then suddenly his face grew eager.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"Ambrosio," he whispered back.

There could be no mistaking that ramrod-like rider. It was the first time Curlie had seen him. Perhaps like some cowardly general he had stood back of the line and had let his men do the fighting. But now he was here.

Slowly Curlie raised his rifle. His finger was on the trigger; the aim was well before the racing rider, the shot must be a sure one. Then, just as his will said "Fire" he felt a savage push at his left shoulder and the next instant crumpled into a heap.

"They got you! Oh, they got you! The beasts!" the girl screamed. The next instant she had snatched up her own rifle and crept to the window to take her fallen comrade's place.

"No, no — you must not!" Curlie protested feebly.

"I can shoot!" she declared savagely. "Shoot better than they can. In the West women fight beside their men. They shall not get us. I will kill that beast of an Ambrosio, watch me if I don't."

Surprised by this violent outburst, Curlie relapsed into silence. The girl, her face flushed, her muscles tense, her breath coming quick and fast, had suddenly changed from a quiet whisperer to a savage young Amazon. He gloried in her spirit. Especially did he like that word of hers, "In the West, women fight beside their men." She was but a girl and he a boy, but he liked her to think of him in this great emergency as "her man."

CHAPTER XX

"THEY HAVE COME"

In the excitement of the moment Curlie tried to rise and take his place beside the girl. He could only crawl feebly across the floor. It was as if every muscle in his body had been controlled and given strength by a spring, and as if that bullet in his shoulder had found the spring and snapped it square off. He was conscious, vividly conscious, of everything that was happening, yet he was powerless.

Greater and greater amazement came to him as he watched the girl. In those days when she was known to him simply as the Whisperer of the air, he had thought of her as his guardian angel, and so she had been. Now, as he caught the flush on her cheek, the flash in her eye, he thought of her as acting a new role, that of his avenging angel. Ambrosio had shot him. She would shoot him in turn.

Now her rifle was lifted and aimed. He marveled at the steadiness of her aim. There came a crack of her rifle, then an exclamation of disgust. She had missed.

Following his tactics, she ducked low as a patter of bullets struck the cabin. For a brief second her shoulder, which registered the wild beatings of her heart, was against his; then again she was up and at them.

Curlie's mind underwent agonies of suspense. Would her message be heard? Would help come? Would it arrive soon enough to save the girl?

Who was this Whisperer? How had she come to be in Chicago at one time and in Alaska at another? How had she come here upon the desert and why? These were some of the questions that crowded his brain. Not once did he think of himself. Not once did he ask himself whether this wound of his was a severe one, whether it would prove fatal. His thoughts were all for the Whisperer.

So a full minute passed; a minute packed full

of suspense as no other time in all his eventful career had been packed. Where were the raiders? Had they given up their circling tactics? Were they, at this very moment, stealing upon the cabin? If this were true, then the end was near. There were too many of them. The girl could not stand against them and he could not come to her aid.

But no; just as he was giving up hope, he saw the girl dart to the west window, throw her rifle to position and fire — all in a second. The next instant she was doing a wild dance across the floor, while the bullets rattled like hail against the cabin.

Curlie stared with gaping mouth. What had come over the girl? Had she gone stark mad?

No, she dropped to his side to whisper, "I got him! I got him!"

"Ambrosio?" he whispered hopefully.

"No, not Ambrosio; but he shall be next!"

Again she gripped her rifle and sprang to her feet.

"What a girl!" Curlie whispered to himself.

"I didn't know there were any like her in the world."

The next instant he was again staring at her as she placed her rifle upon the window-sill and took careful aim. She had grown rigid as a bronze statue. There could be but one solution to such a sudden change.

"Ambrosio?" Curlie whispered hoarsely.

As one in a trance she whispered back, "Ambrosio."

Strangely enough she did not fire. Just as her finger seemed about to touch the trigger, she gripped her rifle and sent it crashing to the floor, while she danced about the room in a rage.

"Why — what——" Curlie stared at her in speechless stupefaction.

"Something happened just as I was ready to shoot. His horse stumbled — something, I don't know what. He went down and out of sight, so I couldn't shoot."

Above the sound of rushing wind there came to their waiting ears the crash of rifle shots,

yet not one of the bullets struck their cabin.

Again the girl was at the window. This time her face turned white. She seemed about to faint. For a brief time she stood there wavering. Then the color came rushing back to her cheeks.

"They've come," she breathed. "The cowboys from the ranch have come. We are safe. Ambrosio is gone. They shot him. I could not see them for the standstorm. We are safe! Safe!"

A great joy appeared to well up from her very soul as she knelt beside Curlie to whisper these words. Then, with a sudden cry, as if discovering something terrible for the first time, she exclaimed:

"Your wound!"

Immediately she bent over him and began to tear away the clothing above his wound. In that instant, as her face came close to his and the dawn brightened almost into day, he recognized her for the first time. His lips framed the name they could not utter:

"Viola Martin."

Then the cabin walls began to whirl madly about him. This lasted but for a second, then all was peace and sleep. The shock of the wound, his loss of blood, had done their work; he had lapsed into unconsciousness. From this unconsciousness he was not to emerge for many hours.

"Perhaps never," whispered the girl, as something very like a sob escaped her lips.

CHAPTER XXI

OLD BALDIE'S REVENGE

Ambrosio was not dead. He was not so much as wounded. His horse had been shot from beneath him and he had been thrown headforemost into the sand. That was all. At the instant he scrambled to his feet a black stallion whose rider had been shot or thrown came galloping by. With a desperate sprint the young outlaw caught up with him and seized his dangling bridle rein. Then, with an acrobatic swing, he threw himself into the saddle. Bullets rained about him, yet not one of them touched so much as a hair of his head. It seemed that he bore a charmed life. And perhaps his life was charmed — who knows? Perhaps he was being saved by the fates for that which followed. In this world of many strange and mysterious influences one can never tell. One thing was

certain. Weaponless and alone, he deserted his comrades and rode away through the sand fog toward the Mexican border.

As for Clyde Hopkins, after fleeing from the band of Mexican raiders he turned Snowball to face the storm and rode slowly toward the ranch which he had left when he first joined Curlie Carson. He was low in spirit, very low indeed. He felt like a young lieutenant who had been trusted with a detachment of soldiers and had lost them all and was making his way slowly and alone back to headquarters.

"No, not quite alone," he breathed as he patted the white mane of Snowball admiringly. "One pair of eyes will brighten when they see us coming home."

Nevertheless, the loss of the drove sat heavily on his shoulders. Three times, in indecision, he halted his pony to ponder the wisdom of turning back and attempting to outwit the Mexicans and get back the horses. Each time his better judgment prevailed and he rode on toward home.

"Ten or twelve of them, all well mounted and armed to the teeth," he told himself with a sigh. "What chance would one lone cowboy have with them?"

So for two hours he rode on in the teeth of the sandstorm. Now as his hat grew heavy with sand he took it off to flop it against his pony's side. Now he dismounted to rub the sand from around the pony's eyes and now paused to turn about and sit for a time with his back to the gale.

"No hurry," he told himself. "Good news needs swift-winged messengers; bad news can wait."

But what was this? As he sat thus resting his pony, he caught the dull thud of hoofbeats on the sand.

"Drat 'em!" he muttered. "What do they want? Have they followed me all this way to take my very mount away from me, to take you, Snowball? Well, that's once they'll fail. You're fairly fresh and we can beat 'em, Snowball, beat 'em!"

Of his own accord the white pony wheeled about and was away like a flash. There followed such a race as Clyde had never in his life experienced. Over smoking sand dunes, through little clumps of sage, around dangerous growths of cactus, they sped. Now plunging down a shifting slope of sand and now plodding up a steep ascent to plunge down again, they raced. It was a race for the freedom of Snowball and for the very life of Clyde, or so Clyde thought of it and so Snowball must have thought, too, if one were to judge by the way she raced forward.

Ever as he shot onward through the sand fog, Clyde turned his head to listen behind him. And ever he caught the thud-thud of horses' feet. At first it seemed to him that there must be many horsemen riding almost abreast. But as the time passed, as the race stretched out into a mile, two miles, three, four, five, he heard the group indistinctly and yet more indistinctly, until at last they were lost to him entirely, and there came the even thud-thud of a

single charger's hoofbeats on the sand.

"Snowball," he half sobbed at last, as he realized that the lone horse was gaining on them, that in time he must overtake them, "I thought you were a swift pony. And you are, one of the swiftest and surest of all the desert, but the horse that villain is riding is a fiend for speed, a very devil with wings."

As he neared an especially tall clump of cactus, he slowed his pony down to a walk, then, swinging him about until he was all but hid by the cactus, brought him to a standstill.

"No use using up every ounce of your strength," he whispered. "He's going to catch us anyway and we might as well take a chance. There's only one cartridge left in my rifle, but that's enough for him if I'm steady and lucky. There are any number of them following, but if we can get rid of this pestiferous mosquito, perhaps we can outride the rest."

So, with rifle ready, he sat in his saddle waiting. Ten seconds passed. The thud of hoofbeats grew louder. Twenty seconds; it seemed

that the rider must be upon them. Thirty, forty and — a golden head of a sorrel with a white spot between his eyes appeared around the clump of cactus. He was headed straight on — did not see the white pony and his rider at all.

The next instant, with an exclamation of surprise Clyde dropped his rifle to the pommel of his saddle. The horse was bridleless, saddleless and riderless. One word came to the boy's lips:

"Baldie!"

It was indeed Old Baldie, the king of his kind, the outlaw of the mountains. How had he eluded the Mexicans? Who could tell? Here he was and alone. No, not alone. He had outdistanced the others, but their hoofbeats could even now be heard in the distance.

At once the young cowboy's mind was busied with a fresh problem. Were these hoofbeats that second by second grew louder the sound of the mounts of the Mexicans who were pursuing Baldie in the notion that they could head him off and drive him back, or had the whole drove

of horses and ponies, led by the dauntless Baldie, escaped their captors and were they making the best of their way back to the mountains?

At first Clyde was inclined to believe that safety lay in further flight, but at last, having felt the heave of Snowball's sides, he settled back in the saddle, to mutter, "I'll take a chance."

As for Baldie, he had not gone a hundred yards beyond the clump when he began slowing up. It was as if he had missed something and was hesitating, with the possible intention of turning back.

"What do you know about that?" Clyde whispered to his mount. "The old rascal has been trailing us, trailing us like a dog. Now he misses our trail. See if he finds us."

Holding quite still in his saddle, he waited. The thunder of hoofbeats grew louder. Baldie had stopped and faced half about. Then from behind the clump of cactus there appeared the straining nostrils of a brown pony. This one was followed by another and yet another until

there were at least forty of them, every one of them riderless.

"The drove!" Clyde whispered in high glee. "Leave it to Old Baldie to lead them out of Egypt into the promised land!"

It was true. The greater number of the drove were here. Some few, the weaker ones, eight or ten in all, had been either killed or captured, but here the rest were and Old Baldie was still their leader.

Clyde was just considering the necessity of getting behind them and of urging them on toward a position of greater safety when the sand fog, having lifted for a moment, gave him sight of the twin peaks of Saddle Mountain.

"Now I know where we are!" he rejoiced. "We are nearly home. We are safe in God's country. No Mexican would dare venture this close to Bill McKee's ranch."

At this instant his attention was attracted by the action of Baldie. He had righted straight about with his tail toward his followers. With head high, with nostrils distended as if he

might be listening with them, he was pointing toward the north. As Clyde strained his ears he too caught the thud-thud of the hoofbeats of a single horse.

"Who can it be?" he asked himself as he once more settled back in his saddle and took a firmer grip on his rifle.

He had not long to wait, for soon, out of the fog, there appeared the head of a black stallion. And mounted on that stallion was a rider.

"Ambrosio!" Clyde whispered as if doubting his own eyes. "Ambrosio alone!"

He lifted his rifle for a quick, sure shot. Then he dropped it once more to his pommel.

"No, Snowball," he whispered, "he's unarmed. One does not shoot even a serpent like him when he has no means of defending himself."

But what was this? Baldie, with ears far back, with lips back from his teeth as if in a snarl, charged straight at the new arrival. Before the surprised Ambrosio could turn his mount about, the two horses had reared upon

their hind feet and had plunged straight at one another in deadly combat.

Clyde sat watching spellbound. What could be the reason for Baldie's action? Had he recognized in this black stallion an ancient rival of the range? Had he merely been surprised into this attack by the suddenness of the arrival? Had he seen in Ambrosio the boy who had attempted to trap him and, having failed, had aimed his rifle to kill him? Who could tell? Who knows what goes on in a super-horse's brain? Here was a fight to the finish; that was enough.

Once, twice, three times they reared and struck. All this time Ambrosio, clinging to his saddle, made desperate efforts to turn the black steed about and to continue his flight. All his efforts were in vain. Mad with rage, the two stallions fought desperately.

And now a strange thing happened. As Baldie reared higher than before, as he struck high and hard, Ambrosio suddenly crumpled in his saddle and slid to the sand. There, trampled

upon by both horses, he lay motionless.

"Can't stand for that, even if he is an enemy," Clyde murmured as he lifted his rifle and carefully aimed his last shot.

"Just to stun, not to kill," he whispered.

Came a time when, for a second, the foaming head of the black stallion was at rest. In that second, Clyde's rifle cracked and the horse, like a felled ox, sank to the sand.

"Hope I didn't shoot too low," Clyde murmured as, dismounting, he hurried toward the scene of the tragedy.

"Nope," he breathed; "creased him, that's all. He'll be up in a minute. Now, let's see about Ambrosio."

For a moment he bent over the fallen outlaw. The next he straightened up with a low exclamation of surprise:

"Mashed his head in like an eggshell. Ambrosio is dead. Old Baldie did for him, and I can't say but it was right. All he's got coming now is a desert burial."

CHAPTER XXII

THE WHISPERER'S MYSTERIES REVEALED

When Curlie Carson awoke from that strange sleep, which was really not sleep at all but unconsciousness, the unconsciousness that had overcome him after he had been wounded in the radio station and the Whisperer had told him that the cowboys had come and that they were safe, he heard the song of birds and smelled the faint perfumes of roses. Knowing that there were neither birds nor flowers about his cabin on the desert, he guessed that he had been carried to Bill McKee's ranch and that days might have passed since that eventful morning when he had been wounded and had discovered that the Whisperer was none other than Viola Martin.

All of these conclusions were correct, but

when he had wanted to talk about them he had been told that the doctor's orders were that he should not talk.

Two days later, as he wakened from a refreshing sleep, feeling strong enough to get up and walk out upon the desert, he was informed by the Whisperer, who sat by his side, that he was indeed much better and that the doctor had said that if there was anything he wished especially to talk to her about, he might do it.

Curlie turned his face on the pillow until he could look at the Whisperer. The girl he saw formed a strange contrast with the "Avenging Angel" whom he had seen out there in the desert cabin; yet she was undoubtedly the same girl, for there were still the thousand freckles adorning a round face. There, too, were the frank blue eyes and the smiling lips that could belong to no other save the Whisperer. Her chaps were gone. In their place was a modest house dress. Her hair, no longer torn into wild tufts by the wind, was done in a graceful roll over her white forehead.

"I — why I —" he hesitated. "I don't think there is much I care to talk about, but," his tone became eager, "I should like very much to have you talk, to have you begin at the beginning and tell me all the secrets of your strange haunting of the air in such a way as has brought me many a bit of good luck, not the least of which is at last the finding of you."

She blushed a little as she took a chair by his side and began the story of her life as it had been lived since her whisper first broke in upon his listening ears, way back in the secret tower in Chicago.

"You probably know," she said, "that I am an orphan, that my father died on this ranch and that I have lived most of my life since then in this place. Well, about a year ago, an uncle of mine, who was supposed to be rich, discovered that I was living out here and wrote for me to join him in Chicago.

"Since he was my only living relative, I thought I should go. So did Mr. McKee. I went. It was not long I lived with my uncle

before I began to feel that he was not altogether the man he should be. He was kind and generous with me, but I discovered that he had a powerful radiophone equipment in his private rooms in the big hotel in Chicago, and that he was using it in unlawful ways for doubtful purposes.

"Shortly after discovering this, I learned, through secret channels, of your station. I was told something about you and the work you were trying to do; so, while I did not desert my uncle, because I hoped to make him see the harm he was doing, I did get in touch with you and did try to help you in preventing him from doing actual harm to the Service.

"I went with him on that terrible trip north, along the Yukon Trail and up to the Arctic. When I knew you were following us, I did all I could to help you, for I knew by that time that it was only a matter of a few weeks, at most, until my uncle would be brought to justice."

"But, but — at the shore of the Arctic you disappeared," put in Curlie.

"Yes," she smiled a little sadly. "I knew that my uncle was at the end of his rope; that I could do no more for him. Up to that time, rascal though he was, I had done everything I could to make his life comfortable. He was crazy about jewels and nothing could bring him to reason. I had an aged Eskimo with me and an extra dog team. The Eskimo took me back to his home and then to Fairbanks, where I caught the first boat down the river in the spring."

"And then you came back to the desert — your home?"

"There was no other place to go."

"And here I have found you."

"Here you found me — or perhaps I found you," she smiled as she crossed her hands in her lap.

For some time Curlie lay listening to the song of birds.

At last he whispered, "Ambrosio?"

"He is dead."

"The cowboys?"

"No. Old Baldie killed him. He had his revenge."

After that there was another story to tell, the story of Baldie's fight with Ambrosio and the black stallion. By the time this was done, the doctor came in and told the Whisperer that her hour was up and that she must go.

Three weeks later Curlie Carson stood in the gateway to Bill McKee's ranch. In his hand was a brand new suit case. He was on his way to another adventure.

"Better just stay with us and settle down," said McKee. His arm was on the Whisperer's shoulder. "Just settle down with us and grow up with the West."

Curlie took one long look at the honest rancher, who had been very kind to him, and at the flushed face and eager blue eyes of the Whisperer, then he turned his face away.

"I am an adventurer," he said huskily. "I guess it's in my blood. My ancestors were Norsemen. I have discovered a new and strange task that promises to lead to adventure. I have

said I would undertake it. I cannot turn back. But if ever the time comes when I feel that I can settle down and live the simple and quiet life, you can bet your last pair of shoes it will be right here on Bill McKee's ranch and I hope the Whisperer may be here too."

"Don't be too sure of that last," smiled the rancher, "and don't wait too long."

With these words and a friendly farewell, Curlie turned his back on the ranch where he had known happy days. The desert radio station was now an assured success. Other operators had been put in charge of it. The days of Curlie's promoting in this territory were over. He had learned of a new invention and was eager to try it out. But of these experiences we cannot tell in this book. They must wait for that other book, which is to be named "The Sea-Going Tank."

As Curlie sped along on the railroad that afternoon, he saw a rider on a black stallion loping down the dusty road and imagined it might be Clyde on the horse that had become his at the

death of Ambrosio and which had come to take the place of Colie. As he looked away at Saddle Mountain, he saw in his mind's eye the golden gleam of a sorrel king of horses as he wandered free in the mountains, and murmured, "Old Baldie. I am glad they let him go free."

When Curlie's train carried him across the mountains and out over the broad, fertile prairies, he fancied that he had seen and heard the last of the Whisperer and he did not feel at all happy about it.

"Almost rather never have discovered her," he grumbled to himself.

He need not have worried about it. He had not seen the last of the Whisperer — not by a long way.

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Dark Treasure

By
ROY J. SNELL

The Reilly & Lee Co.
Chicago

DARK TREASURE

CHAPTER I

THE MYSTERIOUS WHALER

"Listen!" Curlie Carson held up his hand for silence.

At once, save for a strange, distant sound, the launch and the fog-bound sea was silent as a cave.

"That sound now, what is it?" Curlie Carson asked himself. The same question was on the lips of Joe Marion and Gladys Ardmore. Their crew was asking the same question, at least some of them. Others, because of long years of Arctic whaling, knew the sound; yet even to these there was mystery in it.

Faint at first, like the murmur of a distant waterfall, the sound of rushing water increased in volume until all the breathless fog-ridden air was filled with it.

"It—why, it's some mad craft! She'll run us down sure!" Curlie exclaimed, leaping to his feet.

Kennedy, the gray whiskered mate who sat at the tiller, did not move so much as a finger.

The next moment, with a wild whirl of foam, the thing was upon them; or at least it seemed so as they saw it burst through the curtain of fog that surrounded them. In truth, even as they sat there, the indistinct form came abreast of them, then shot by with the speed of the wind.

"A whale!" gasped Gladys.

"What luck!" Curlie's hand was on the fly wheel of the gasoline motor. He gave it a whirl. The engine popped. But the gray whiskered seaman pulled Curlie to his seat and the engine coughed and died.

"Now wha—what d'y' do that for?" Curlie stuttered. "We might have—have—"

"Dark treasure, sure enough," said Kennedy, "but not for us." He pointed calmly at the spot where the whale had broken the overhanging curtain of fog. Even as Curlie looked—and they all looked—the curtain was split again, this time by the prow of a whaleboat, very evidently being towed at a terrific speed.

Curlie Carson Listens In

By

ROY J. SNELL

The Reilly & Lee Co.
Chicago

Curlie Carson Listens In

CHAPTER I

A STRANGE MESSAGE

Behind locked and barred doors, surrounded by numberless mysterious-looking instruments, sat Curlie Carson. To the right of him was a narrow window. Through that window, a dizzy depth below, lay the city. Its square, flat roofs formed a mammoth checker-board. Between the squares criss-crossed the narrow black streets. Like a white chalk-line, drawn by a careless child, the river wound its crooked way across this checker-board.

To the left of him was a second narrow window. Through this he caught the dark gleam of the broad waters of Lake Michigan. Here and there across the surface twinkled the

lamps of a vessel, or flashed the warning beacon of a lighthouse.

A boy in his late teens was Curlie. Slender, dark, with coal-black eyes, with curls of the same hue clinging tightly to his well-shaped head, he had the strong profile and the smooth tapering fingers that might belong to an artist, a pickpocket or a detective.

An artist Curlie was, an artist in his line — radio. Although still a boy, he was already an operator of the "commercial, extra first-class" type. So far as license and title were concerned, he could go no higher. A pickpocket he was not, but a detective he might be thought to be; a strange type of detective, however, a detective of the air; the kind that sits in a small room hundreds of feet in air and listens; listens to the schemes, the plots, the counterplots of men and to the wild babble of fools. His task was that of aiding in the capture of knaves and the silencing of foolish folks who used the newly-discovered radiophone as their mouthpiece.

"Foolish people," Major Whittaker, Curlie's

superior, who had called him to the service, had said, "do quite as much damage to the radio service as crooks. Fools and knaves must alike be punished and your task will be to help catch them."

Wonderful ears had Curlie Carson, perhaps the most wonderful ears in the world. In catching the fine shadings of diminishing sounds which came to him through the radio compass, there was not a man who could excel him.

So Curlie sat there surrounded by wire-wrapped frames, coils, keys, buttons, switches, motors, dry-cells, storage batteries and all the odds and ends which made up the equipment of the most perfect listening-in station in the world.

As he sat there with Joe Marion, his pal, by his side, his brow was wrinkled in thought. He was reviewing the events of the previous night. At 1:00 a. m., the witching hour when the crooked ones, the mean ones, come creeping forth like ghosts to carry on doubtful conversations by radio, a strange thing had happened.

A message had gone crashing out through space. Wave lengths 1200 meters long sped it on its way. There was power enough behind it to carry it from pole to pole, but all it had said was:

"A slight breeze from the west."

Three times the message had been repeated, then had come silence. There had been no answer though Curlie had listened long for it on 1200 meter wave lengths and five other lengths as well.

Sudden as had come the message, fleet as had been its passing, it had not been too fleet for Curlie. He had compassed its direction; measured its distance. On a map of the city which lay before him he had made a pencil cross and said:

"It came from there." And he was right, for, strange as it may seem, an expert such as Curlie can sit in a hidden tower room such as his was and detect the exact location of a station whose message has set his ear drums aquiver.

The location had puzzled him. There was not